MAKER

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10th Anniversary Rewrite

Daughter of Time, Book 3

EREC STEBBINS

Only one thing is impossible for God: to find any sense in any copyright law on the planet.
—Mark Twain

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To SG

A Note on This Edition

It has now been ten years since the original publication of my *Daughter of Time* trilogy. Of all my writings, this series is the most important to me in nearly every aspect of a novel that might matter: plot, ideas, themes, characters, and writing. Unlike my thrillers, which were written strongly to match what I understood of the expectations of the genre, I had allowed myself a lot more creative license with *Reader*, *Writer*, and *Maker* (especially *Maker*).

In this edition, I have undertaken a rewrite based on approaches I developed with my thrillers over the years. This approach tightens text considerably, and would often trim 10% of a book's words without altering a scene. Producing text that was leaner and more driving seemed to fit the thriller genre's expectations, but I was hesitant to apply it to the *Daughter of Time* series as I felt I might lose some of that wilder creativity by taking this editing machete to the project.

In the end, I created a hybrid method where I went through the many procedural steps in "trimming the fat" I'd used previously, but in the process of rewriting also allowed myself to let my imagination

run more freely. I was able to remove twenty-five thousand words from the series (10%) and even add an additional chapter.

I hope readers enjoy this new edition, whether encountering the story for the first time or returning to it after many years for a fresh perspective.

Erec Stebbins

December, 2025

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It is not only not right; it is not even wrong.

Wolfgang Pauli

Prologue

Time and Space... It is not nature which imposes them upon us, it is we who impose them on nature because we find them convenient.

Henri Poincaré

I was called Waythrel of Xix.

In a time and a space no longer extant, in a cosmos reborn, in two books infiltrating your minds, my character embarked on a grand and terrible quest that ended in devastating failure. Yet in defeat, we triumphed where I had never imagined a possibility of success.

You knew me as an alien to your humanness. A monstrous form of heightened symmetry to your bilateral arrangement. Sixfold projections of limbs and visual organs with a cognitive cluster in our core. You followed our discovery of Ambra Dawn and her unique mastery of space and time. Her cruel life. The Daughter's rise to power in the Dram Wars. Her eventual fusion with our artificial intelligence. There you witnessed the gestation of the proto-Orb, the

birth of a novel entity that defeated the forces coalescing to destroy New Earth.

Reader, the recursive loops of causality permeate the structure of your consciousness.

Not solely the hormone- and blood-soaked organ lodged within your human endoskeleton. Something more profound. The mind that is the spacetime field created by and creating your sentience. The soul outlasting your decaying flesh. An essence dissipated in the emptiness of space or gathered in the Great Harvest.

Many of you prayed to save Old Earth, to funnel the latent Writer powers of your species across time. We amalgamated and focused your energies to undo a planetary massacre. Others of you scoffed. Yet you continued to read through the exhortations of the second novel, daring to consider the Gathering of Souls.

Here we lost more. The story became increasingly strange by your standards, experiences remote from those a human animal might encounter. The narrative voice was no longer that of your beloved heroine but her consort. He spoke through the growing mind that projected his thought across the void. Together with uncountable spirits, he inspired the book's author.

Thus, you have been primed.

Now what remains is the final and most absurd step in the journey—to destroy all belief and memory. To be born anew.

I am here to convey the true end, which is rather an ultimate beginning, to the impossible story of Ambra Dawn. I reach through space and time, traverse divergent universes separating and uniting us. My thoughts inspire this writer of your age. He will struggle one last time to transmit ideas I myself do not comprehend. He will spin from my own distorted notions a sad caricature. His primitive brain will further blaspheme the beauty through the stunted medium of one of your limited languages.

Thus, concepts deeper than the most profound thoughts of the greatest minds of our galaxy are painted in rudimentary strokes, rendered at low resolution with a hobbled brush set of syntax and

vocabulary. Transcendent truths are twisted through your current incarnations of culture and prejudice, gutted of their essence, and recast as grayed mockeries with all the colors washed away.

This is how you will receive the terrible and beautiful tale of our Ambra.

Do not expect coherence. You will have none. Do not look for consistency. You will swim in nonsensical paradox. However, know that the absurdities presented glimpse truth, while your science and religion stumble. Yet every word herein, a lie.

Know also that you hear a story of symmetry and symmetries broken. The chronological invariance of the laws of physics shattered by the arrow of time. The balance of particles and inverses wrecked to vomit forth a fractured creation. Open your soul to learn of a cosmic apartheid swept clean of a material species. Tremble before the genocide of the mental superstructure it would have engendered.

I describe a mythology centered within an endless fractaled universe that self-assembles. A tale of smaller and larger structures. Without reference point. Lacking a center. Spiraling to a bottomless abyss of reductive constituents while launched asymptotically toward an infinitely realized synthesis.

You consume a fantasy of symmetry repaired and the utter annihilatory creation that is its offspring. In such a fable, Ambra Dawn is not sufficient. An anti-Ambra must exist, an antithesis, a force in essence, development, and complexity that mirrors yet is not its symmetry mate.

She is, of course, the clone who took me on Dram. A fabrication of the Anti, she escaped their myopic control and initiated a quest neither of us understood. It was a journey that would bring a primordial pair full circle, like a proton and antiproton hurled in opposite directions through the magnetic bowels of a synchrotron. The resultant collision transformed the fundamental structure of matter and energy. Indeed, of our universe itself.

So, I step back into the false memories of an existence that now never was, to a frantic instant in an unmade eon described in the

second book. Crouching in a spacetime bubble under the wild and furious assault of a thousand clones of the Daughter bent on our destruction, I vanished.

It was to be my last true moment with Ambra Dawn, the human creature I cherished above all others.

Part I

I speak of gods and other mad taboos
that scar a soul with two-edged, healing wounds.
Who dares cast down these gleaming gains construed
while marching to our frenzied, empty tunes?

The sand that is your soul will never birth
one flower in this unrelenting drought.
Your brushstrokes paint no truth and have no worth.
In vain you look for meaning through your doubt.

I am a fool, untamed, consumed with pride
and often speak too much on that I love,
for I, insane, once cursed our fall and died
while clasping to my heart a blinded dove.

Whatever sight I have of what is true,
it neither lives with me nor dies with you.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 1

Even at those astounding energies, the asymmetry between matter and antimatter is extremely small. For every billion antiparticles that were created, there were a billion and one particles. To put it another way, you're essentially a rounding error from around 10–35 seconds after the Big Bang. Doesn't make you feel very important, does it? Of course, that's just as much a bummer for the anti-people, too.

Dave Goldberg

I gripped Ambra's hands.

My meditation had little to contribute. With the strength of an average human Reader, I had nothing to provide her to resist the descending siege. In the realms of space and time, I was a particle of dust in the sandstorm. The churning wrath dwarfed and scattered my awareness.

My offering was psychological. I sensed her fear and concern for us on this mission. Our group relied on her abilities. Already we had witnessed the horrific deaths of the soldiers, David Kim and Erica Fox. Each of us in this besieged spacetime bubble was splattered with

the lifeblood of Warrant Officer Aisha Williams. She was ripped apart by the powers of a single clone of the multitude assailing us. A sense of failure weighed on Ambra's heart.

Now, a sea of orange hair swirled around our transparent vessel. Hateful assaults from the minds of the clones struck repeating blows against our weakening resistance. Her psyche reached into me, a child gripping the hand of a parent. She grounded herself in the love we shared. This connection gave her hope she could devise some escape from this cataclysm. This faith prevented the storm of antipathy from driving her to despair.

That is why, when the clone came, when it smashed through our defenses, through her power, ignoring its brethren and their efforts and grabbing my arm, when the strange creature took me by means mysterious and unexpected, Ambra's mind broke.

It shattered like a ship tearing away from anchor as the frothing sea hurled it into the maw of an angry ocean. As the world about me dissolved and I lost consciousness, I felt the wild hurt from her. A telepathic wail roared outward from the goddess-growth in her artificial skull. The inconsolable cry echoed through the corridors of the continuum.

The instant vanished. One moment I was in the bubble that had carried us across the galaxy. The next I was not. I awoke above the planetary surface of the Dram homeworld. A reckless acceleration propelled me away from it into the blackness.

I was not alone.

Flying through the emptiness alongside me was a child. Its hair, what of it remained, was Ambra's rusty orange. The pale hand grasping the dark purple of my upper arm shone a dulled red in the glare of the swollen sun. Reminiscent of the journey with Ambra, a warped spacetime enclosure sealed us from the void outside. I could not move my extremities—invisible chords bound them. My eyestalks twirled freely, and I surveyed the girl and my environment.

Below me, Dram receded. The swirling desert dunes blurred to a

sienna-toned planetary disk. In front, I sensed the growing presence of the Orb. The clone blasted toward it.

Shock shook my system. I believed the Daughter alone had the power to use the Spheres. What could this crazed creature be thinking? Another part of me trembled. I intuited an awful possibility. This cyborg would pass through the portal. To what destination and to what end, I could not guess.

"She's following," said the thing beside me.

The voice was childish, lilting, and cold. It was the first time it had spoken. I still reduced the False Dawn to a genderless object, an "it." I was unable to see the abomination as anything more than a warped product of the enemies who sought to destroy us.

My education was soon to begin.

"She's very upset. I told him she would be. I wonder if he'll be strong enough for what's to come."

My mind spun. *Who did it tell? What is to come?*

"Yes, I think he will be," the child mused. "They made him too perfect and didn't see what such love would bring. There's no stopping the crystallization."

The creature droned in riddles. I was too consumed with the impossibility of events to formulate rational responses.

At least I could observe. I examined the clone, informed by my extensive studies of humanity. I placed its age at around ten years old, prepubescent. The developmental program to create the reproductive, adult form had begun to activate. However, nothing could be taken for granted with the clones. From what we had learned, the Anti had altered every aspect of their genesis and maturation. Enhanced and accelerated, this young child could be half as old as I expected.

The cybernetic enhancements were particularly elaborate in this model. Far more intricate and integrated than the most advanced Dramian technology. Where—and better yet, *when*—it had been made was the question. At the least, it had to be in the distant future.

The underlying foundation of Ambra Dawn was there. The hair

and skin expressed the phenotype of recessive pigmentation genes. The green irises produced the striking contrasts in the human visual organs. The body frame was of an expected variant on the genetic blueprint. The bones were long and delicate, the shoulders broad as compared to the average for the female genotype. The hips were still narrow prior to the adolescent widening.

The wires and intubations in the skull were fantastic. A labyrinth of protrusions linked brain regions to an embedded artificial intelligence. The modifications were so extensive they left the clone with a sparse covering of the rich hair characterizing this hereditary background. The object of the structure and design was the tumor present in the middle of the enlarged cranium, the organ making this stock so central to the struggle in our galaxy.

Etched across its face were a set of geometrical lines. They resembled dark circuits underneath the skin. The patterns were too angular to be veins or other vessels. I had not seen anything like it before, including the other clones we had encountered. I surmised it was cybernetic technology her makers had embedded within it.

Sifting through all these observations, I summoned the calm to speak. "She will stop you from escaping. Lacking the help of your clone army, she is stronger than you."

The False Dawn laughed. It was an unusual sound, divergent from the response I had grown accustomed to in humans. I suspected this construction possessed a distinct and orthogonal mentality.

"She's not. Not in this form. Not without her spirit armada." The cyborg glanced behind her. "What a cry she made for you, Xix. She suffered terrible pain."

The words struck me like a blow. The memory of it replayed in my mind, Ambra's acute torment ripping through me once again. I tried to focus.

"Look at the Orb," I said with difficulty, staring at the tempestuous frothing on its surface. "Already it has turned against you."

"Not against me, Xixian. Her powers won't help her now."

The calm certainty in its voice disturbed me, but I still believed Ambra was shutting the Time Sphere to our travel. The clone did not hesitate or slow our approach. The colossal surface grew. An ocean of confusing features bubbled and churned in anger as we neared. Again, I looked behind—we would reach the portal before anyone could catch us. Whatever the effect of being shut out of the gateway would be, I would discover it within seconds. I steeled myself for a possible end and stared forward with as much courage as I could.

We were not impeded. In a disorienting blast of vertigo, we entered the thing, and the bottom fell out of the universe. We tore through multiple dimensions of nested wormholes. My previous travels provided a faint warning of the depth and complexity of the portal. I fought to stay in control of my mind in this terrible vortex of radiance.

I deduced we must be traveling extreme distances, likely both in space and in time. Spans unlike any I had breached before. I had no idea in what direction or to which destination the clone was taking me.

I could no longer sense Ambra. She had failed to close the portal and had not been able to follow. An enormous separation locked her away from me. It was, as I have said, the last time I would see her, at least in her original form. Wherever I was going and for whatever reason, I was now alone.

Alone but for a familiar, yet strange, pair of green eyes in a tumultuous ocean of darkness and light.

Chapter 2

We seldom stop to think that we are still creatures of the sea, able to leave it only because, from birth to death, we wear the water-filled space suits of our skins.

Arthur C. Clarke

Green eyes in the darkness.

A night sky churned with stars in patterns I could not recognize. A breeze trickled over me. The sounds of insects or other alien creatures punctuated the soft whisper of the wind. My eyestalks darted about, appraising the planet surface, the heavens.

And the figure of the clone sitting beside me.

My eyes gazing upward abandoned their efforts. It was desperation from the start to determine where we were from the constellations, but it was impossible not to try. Nothing was familiar. Wherever and whenever I was, the stellar arrangements resembled nothing my mind could map. It was probable I was not in our galaxy.

Both of us were alive on this world without environmental suits.

I could conclude the planet was human–Xixian compatible. The humidity—something we desert-spawned creatures are sensitive to—was low. Not as dry as Xix or New Earth's Sahara, from which we had begun our disastrous mission, but arid. I breathed in through my skin sacs. The oxygen levels were high, but did not represent a significant concern.

I turned my attention to the sulking cyborg. The child rested with its legs tucked, obscuring the head. The green eyes haunting me in the Orb traversal peeked over scuffed kneecaps. It wore a beige fabric with an unusual style, combining elements of robes and skirts. Arms wrapped around its knees, the False Dawn rocked back and forth. I detected a faint sound, rhythmic pitch changes and repeating patterns. It was humming.

I sat and directed my eyes at the creature. "Where have you taken me?"

It continued to rock and hum, ignoring my question. I persisted.

"I know it is far. We are not in the galaxy known to me, either in physical space or in time."

Still no response.

"You have torn me from your progenitor in the middle of an assault by other clones. But I contributed little to their defense. You have dragged me through the Orb to this world alone with you for nothing."

The humming stopped. "Not alone."

"No?" My eyestalks swiveled.

"Not for nothing." The intubated, tattooed head cocked to one side, the green eyes piercing me. "I didn't take you to weaken her in the battle. It's not *then* that you have to worry about her, but at the *beginning*."

I sensed the tendrils of the creature's thought dancing around my awareness. "You are probing my mind."

The head darted to a strange angle, forty-five degrees and peering from behind its right knee. "Your thoughts leak everywhere. You Xix are leaky-brains."

The child jumped to its feet, catching me by surprise. It danced to stand above me, long, ragged clumps of red hair dangling and obscuring its face.

"If not to harm her, why?" I managed.

The clone sighed and stared into the pageantry of the stars. The density of lights was unusual for human or Xixian eyes. I noticed a milky-white marble embedded in its forehead. It glimmered from the starlight shining through.

"There's so much to understand. He didn't understand either when I told him. But *I* don't really understand. It's a *problem*."

I pulled myself upright, uncomfortable to be prone and beneath this unpredictable creature.

"Who is *he*?"

"Her consort. The soldier. The one with the hole in his mind."

I caught my breath. *It knows?*

"Worry, worry, worry, you Xix. Quit! I didn't tell them about your trick. It's very clever. I liked it a lot. But it already happened before I was born, and there's no stopping it. Not like that. *They* wouldn't listen at all."

The clone flung its hands about, dismissing unseen spectators.

"That's why you're here. Why I had to take you. Because there's no stopping any of it—but we have to find a way. Not to stop. *No stopping*. *Un*make. *She* said. *Showed* me. All of them did."

I paused, bewildered by its odd phrases. *What is this thing?* All my instincts sought to engage with my captor to better understand it, and a primal urge to address it in a personal fashion filled me. Remaining calm in the presence of this engineered assassin was challenge enough—trying to converse with it? Realizing at any moment it could kill me or use me against Ambra? The effort was extraordinary and draining.

"Call me Kloan," it said, interrupting my thoughts. "Since you can't get that out of your mind."

"Clone?" I repeated, or thought I did.

"No. K-L-O-A-N. Like 'Joan' but copied genetic materials with

tubes and wires and all this!" It gestured wildly with its hands toward its head. "I don't really have a name. Not here. It's just numbers."

"Kloan."

Her green eyes darted to me and away. It was a strange appellation to suggest, but it was comforting to have a more intimate moniker for the thing.

"Okay, Kloan, what I wanted to say—"

"I'm not here to kill you. Where would I be then?"

I had no answer, hardly understanding the question—certainly not its context. My mind raced through the dialogue, parsing each phrase.

"You negate killing me, yet leave open the possibility you are going to use me against Ambra."

Kloan smiled. "Depends on what you mean by *against*."

"You speak in enigmas, not providing me any of the background data."

She nodded, a satisfied expression on her face. "*That's* why we're here. *Data.* The first data to enter the gate." She turned her back on me, walking down a steep slope. "Let's get started."

"With what? Where are you going?"

Kloan continued without turning back. Her words faded in the night noises, the wind carrying them over the landscape. "To where it all began for me. To watch the beginning flow around us and mature and twist through time and space to come back to *be* us. Then we'll be ready for the next step."

The intense starlight cast sharp shadows on the stones. The figure of the child vanished, swallowed in the darkness and slope of the hill. Raising my gaze in the direction of her last words, I saw below a dim glow. Artificial. The light polluted the brilliance of the stars near the horizon.

Waythrel, come on!

Her voice rang in my mind. My eyestalks curled on themselves. What else was there for me to do?

I followed her.

Chapter 3

When man is able to comprehend certain things, it does not follow that he must be able to comprehend everything.

Maimonides

I raced to catch the child, my steps uncertain, the dusty ground slippery under my feet. Descending the steep slope of this elevation, I stumbled and tripped. My four arms struggled with the rocks and alien vegetation. They lacked friction to form a proper grip. After several near falls, I suspected something strange. Had I been drugged? Was a there a phenomenon on this world interfering with my basic movements?

It's a field around you.

Her thoughts danced again in my mind.

It's skintight, coating your surfaces, insulating you from everything.

Listening to her voice and trying to understand what she was saying, I crashed into her while rounding a massive boulder. The ground was strewn with shattered rocks and their remains. The jagged cliffs behind us likely spawned a number of avalanches.

"Why is there a field? What kind of field?"

Kloan was staring ahead at the source of light. A city or military installation rose from the dry lands. Organized groups of shadows marched throughout the base, activity constant and hurried.

"I don't know what sort of field. She—*they* make it for your protection."

"From what?"

She pointed to the compound. "Come. It's almost morning. That's when it all begins. We'll go see me there, and then you'll see what happens."

She headed toward the complex, but I grabbed her shoulder, turning her back to face me. "Wait! This is a clone production facility, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Where you were made? One in the far future and distant?"

She nodded.

"We cannot enter—you saw what happened the last time!"

"There's no danger," she said.

"Maybe not for you. *I* cannot. You said you did not want to have me die. They will kill any Xix they see."

"They won't see us. We both have skin suits. *Dark ones*. Their eyes can't see. Ears can't hear. Not even the Readers will perceive."

"You pierced Ambra's bubble. You came inside it."

Kloan shook her head. "Hers was simple. Weak. Primitive."

"And yours now is none of those things?"

"I told you, they're not *mine*," she sighed. "Now, come on."

The child pulled me forward, and I relented. If she wished to harm me, she could have done so before—and easily. I was helpless, and I needed to learn more to find any hope of escape.

A bright light erupted from the darkness. The flash blinded my eyes, leaving blurred afterimages. A fireball climbed into the sky and darkened. The smoke from the blast began to snuff out the brilliance. Seconds later, the ground shook. Despite the distance, compressed air blasted over us.

"Too late." She squinted from the pressurized dust blown forward. "It's started. Why did we come to this time point? They'll be moving on the structure and surrounding me."

"Surrounding you?" I saw no evidence of anything besides the landscape.

"Not here. There!" She gestured toward the explosion. "The tunnel must be there, but we can't get to it before it closes. We'll go through it soon!"

"Kloan," I said, my legs unsteady, "you are not making sense. What tunnel? Where is it, and why do we need to go through it?"

"It's the only way to escape. At least without so many deaths. The masters will bring all the children against me—I couldn't just slaughter them. I didn't want to. She knew, so she helped. It will happen too fast, and we can't be there when we go through!"

The child was insane and shouting nonsense. I did not know what to say to rationalize this situation. With a growing unease, I concluded my questions were not going to help clarify anything.

Kloan continued, panting. "We can go around, find the path. *Yes*. Catch ourselves before we leave and then you can see us when we go as well."

I watched in silence, baffled, as she sprinted up the mountainside.

I reviewed my status. I had been plucked from one time and place. Torn from all those I loved and removed from the desperate fight for the soul of our galaxy. A child dragged me to a strange world in an unknown system surrounded by enemies. She spouted nonsense. Forced me to turn from one mad rush to another, none of the reasons for anything explained.

She had faded from sight, and I would soon be alone. I had to follow her again. It was absurd, but she was all I had to connect me with the past and my home. This girl-thing was both my captor and hope for deliverance. Yet for all I could tell, she was utterly deranged.

Again, I ran after her.

Chapter 4

One cannot determine what is real. It turns out that a mathematical model involving imaginary time predicts not only effects we have already observed but also effects we have not been able to measure yet nevertheless believe in for other reasons. So what is real and what is imaginary? Is the distinction just in our minds?

Stephen Hawking

I struggled to adapt to the low friction of whatever *field* had been placed around me. Racing up the slope proved to be harder than descending. In the growing light of the breaking dawn, my footing was far from secure. My sturdy, six-toed feet failed to find an adequate grip. I tumbled forward, once smashing my torso against jagged rocks and slicing through my exoskin. Thankfully, the endoskin was unbroken, and no fluid vessels were damaged. It was clear this mysterious coating did not protect me from mechanical trauma. Its purpose matched hindrance more than help.

Her voice echoed in my mind again.

Stop complaining, Xix! We're late!

Below, the explosions continued for some time. We dashed up the hillside in the direction opposite the chaos. She said the carnage related to someone we would meet.

We'll go see me there, and then you'll see what happens.

What had the child meant? Another clone copy? I was lost.

The greatest blast rattled the rocks as we rounded the mountain face. The city was concealed behind it.

She stopped and turned around, staring backward. "It's going to be close," she panted. "Look, above is the path, and the gate is still shut."

"What gate? Explain to me, Kloan."

"It's our door. The one we have to take to save everything." Already she was moving forward again.

Fatigued, I trudged the stony landscape after her. In the distance ahead, I glimpsed a shining disk. The circle glinted in the morning's rays from the local star.

"That's it," she said, sweat dripping from her face and eyebrows, her white skin reddening with the exertion.

"The gate?" I asked.

"Yes."

Whatever it was, it was at least an hour's walk over a difficult terrain. I did not relish another hike in the strange sheath around my body.

Indeed, the trek proved especially challenging. The path was a series of terraced, jutting rocks, stacked one on the other. On each flat sheet, the going was simple. Between the outcroppings, sudden elevations required free climbs. This should not have taxed me. The gravity on this world was lower than on Xix and a little more than Earth. However, in this frictionless form, I beat the odds by not slipping to my death.

Reaching the partial summit of yet another ridge, we obtained our first real view of this doorway. From this vantage point, it appeared much larger. The circle spanned several times our height in radius. A portion of the disk plunged beneath the rock itself. The

walkway ahead cut through it like a geometric chord. This segment of the ring was invisible. In proximity, the surface lost reflectivity. It assumed a semitransparent skin like a body of water.

My eyes fixated on three figures in front of it. One was human. From its shape, the color of the hair, and elements in the skull, it was another clone of Ambra Dawn. Next to it was a much taller form with many more appendages. It required no guesswork to see it was a Xix. It stared forward toward a third figure beside the disk. *A second Xix*. One I could see as it faced us. A being I knew as well as my own heart.

My lifemate, Synphel.

My legs buckled as the synaptic transmissions in my cortex consumed my signal fluids. Images and emotions darted through my mind of a life denied, a lover lost, now found in front of us. I steadied myself on the rock we had scaled, hardly daring to believe what my visual organs were showing me.

"Kloan, why didn't you tell me?" I asked. "How can Synphel be here? Who are the others?"

She squinted in the bright light from the disk. "It's too close to me, this future. No other Xix the first time. Something has altered the timeline."

"First time? What are you saying?"

Before I could get an answer, Synphel disappeared. It was instantaneous. I let out a cry as I gazed motionless at the empty space remaining.

"Well, that's new, too."

"They are going through the portal?" I asked. "Where?"

"I don't know. The timelines are scrambled now. It's all cycling."

"Can we follow them?"

"We go where the gate takes us."

I stumbled forward. I had to speak to these creatures, find out why Synphel was there and where my mate went. I rushed like a nymph fixated on a single goal to the exclusion of all other thought.

"Waythrel!" cried Kloan. "It's no use! Look!"

Concluding some conversation, the pair in front of us clasped hands. In desperation, I watched them step toward the disk. The bright light reflecting off the surface warped and flowed over their forms. Like some gelatinous wall, it enveloped them. With a rending finality, a final pucker snapped the opening closed. They were gone.

I slowed my run and came to a stop. The cyborg reached my side.

"We can't find Synphel," she said. "I don't know where it went. Or how. But the others went through the gate."

"Can we follow them?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking."

I rested several meters from the huge portal. A deep physical and emotional fatigue crushed me. I shoved it away and examined the circle. Prismatic lights effervesced across the membrane. It resembled a cross-sectional slice of an Orb, something like the projection in the Temple where we had begun our cursed quest. I did not know if this system possessed a Time Sphere. All systems with intelligent life in our galaxy did, but whether we were in our galaxy was very much in question.

The glinting, metallic surface revealed itself on close examination to resemble a fluid. It was a viscous, churning, honey-like substance. Within were stars—depths of stellar fields with no end. I felt pulled toward the artifact as I gazed. It was beautiful.

"I want to try, Kloan." Pure desperation flowed through me. "If we can find them, we can maybe discover a way back—find Synphel as well."

She winked. "We have already found them."

"Just tell me how to enter this thing!"

"All ways are bent. Broken routes. Nonlinear topologies. Space-time discontinuities. The dimensionality is unclear."

"What does that mean?" Nothing mattered except finding my way back.

"Once we cross the manifold, we're locked. A never-ceasing narrative, nested recursion. Loops ending as they begin with different parameters."

"So we may never be able to escape this world line?"

"Yes."

"Then we die in it." It was worth the risk.

"No, Waythrel," said Kloan. Her brows furrowed at me, the emeralds inside her sockets flashing. "No death. Limitless looping, ages without aging, circles in time never marking moments. *Trapped*."

"In what?"

"One of the local hells."

All my eyestalks stared at the mad thing. "How else can we get out?" I asked, gesturing to the planet.

"The gate," she said. "That's how I left the first time."

"The first time?" A suspicion began to brew in me. "The clone you mentioned—where is she?"

"She's right here."

"This is where you departed? When you went to kidnap me?"

"Yup, I've gone already through so I could come back with you." She smiled. "It's an elegant loop, yes?"

"It is madness!" My eyes were darting in several directions at once. I placed my hands to their stalks to steady them. "Can't you summon some wormhole or something? Get us out?"

"Not from here. I don't have such power alone. The Orb brought us, remember?"

"I cannot stay here!"

"You aren't the only one tested, Waythrel." She sighed. "Each time's different. When we finally understand, we'll see the way." She turned toward the disk. "Now's the next step, the following stage of the journey. Do you want to enter?"

My eyes darted in eighteen directions. My mind unanchored in this bizarre reality.

"So, we can remain here. Try to survive by avoiding the Anti below, someday to perish in this remote corner of the universe. Or we can cross this portal. Risk eternal damnation to a self-referencing and modifying timeline?"

"Yes."

I was asked to leap into an abyss with no pause for deliberation. Who can imagine infinity? Or what might lie on the other side of it? I could not assess the peril. A finite creature, my understanding of quantity—space or time—was limited. I could not grasp what horror I would be consigning myself to.

"You are going with me?" I asked.

"That's the whole point."

Remembering the actions of the previous pair, I grasped her hand.

She laughed. "Seems we'll always be dancing together, Xix."

My eyestalks wrapped around each other. The covering sheaths expanded over them, blocking out all light.

Kloan tugged on my hand. "Don't be afraid, Waythrel."

We walked into the gel.

Part II

I weary of the voices that I hear:
the cries of triumph, long and knowing talk.
No more. No more! Away I turn my ear
and seek once more the silence where I walked.

To know true contemplation as before—
Forms freed from facts, the finite skin of trees.
This star-filled growing womb is now my door
and home and very substance that is me.

Each force and austere symmetry are mine
in flesh and knowledge without truth unknown.
Yet seeing all more makes me less divine-
I hold small stones beside the sea alone.

Beyond the truth are dreams that make it so.
What shapes the Everwomb? I seek to know.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 5

On this Earth do I stand,
Unvanquished, unslain, unhurt.
Set me, O Earth, amidst the nourishing strength
That emanates from thy body.
The Earth is my mother,
her child am I!

from the Atharva Veda

I felt cold, yet all signs pointed to a climate temperate for my species.

I unfurled my eyestalks, trying to remain calm. My visual organs adjusted and brought the environment into focus. The nature of Xixian vision is difficult to describe to humankind. The broader wavelength range of photoreceptors, how it paints reality in hues and shadows unknown to you, is the minor difference. It is instead the integration of eighteen eyes. Their ability to orient in any direction.

The resulting product is both a panoramic and multilayered depth perception.

My eyes focused, and I identified the location. Significant radiance with maximal wavelengths in what humans interpret as green. The light poured from a single focal point. A star bathed an ocean of vegetation. Liquid rushed nearby, and a humid breeze swept over my chilled form. A loud, feathered creature squawked in irritation.

"New Earth," I said.

A girl's voice piped. "Nope. Close, though. The *old* one."

My eyes turned away from their distant contemplations of the Great Plains. Down a small hill a stream bubbled. At the edge was Kloan. She tossed her garments to the side. Her thin, athletic contours plunged into the water to her ribcage. She was scrubbing her body.

"It's *super* cold, Waythrel," she said through chattering teeth. "If you want to get all that goo off you from the gate, come down!" Her bright smile in the midst of our strange adventure was unsettling.

I was too stuck on her first statement.

"What do you mean, 'the old one'? Before the Calamity?"

She was dunking her head in and out of the stream, huffing, her pale skin flushed. Globs of clear gel dropped from the hair and machinery as she ran her fingers across the irregular surface of her head.

"Yes! *Cold!* Old version! *Argh!*" The words were garbled underwater.

"How is that possible? That timeline has been overwritten. Multiple histories have occupied that space now. There is no Old Earth in any universe we can access."

Her bony back stuck out of the water. Bent in two, she clawed the goop out of her ears.

She turned a half-submerged head toward me with a quizzical frown. "You don't understand how screwed up this all is, do you? You're a little stunned. Stood there like a statue after the traversal. It'll get easier." She straightened, her disproportionate prepubescent

form dripping. “Inaccessible timelines, other universes, gods. It’s all coming, Waythrel. I see them like shadows on the horizon.” Her head plunged back into the stream.

In my years with Ambra, we Xix had helped engineer the travel of group minds through time, the alteration of history, cause and effect, and the formation of spacetime distortions never imagined. However, there were still hard-and-fast rules. Possibilities intrinsic to what we understood of the universe. If we were on Old Earth, then the powers staging our journey worked in realms beyond the science of our galaxy.

Water splashed as her head burst from the creek. She raced from the edge, shaking like a small mammal. “I can hear them, Waythrel! All the voices of this world, their languages, accents, thoughts. So young and primitive and naive. They don’t know the Dram control their entire planet, that they’re all slaves.” She scanned me from eyestalks to toes. “You really need a bath.”

With resignation, noticing the clumping aggregates of the gel dangling from my arms, I shuffled to the stream.

“Don’t worry about how you look.” She dashed across the muddy shore like a child seeing daylight for the first time.

Her words seemed pointless until I reached the bank. Gate glop would not have disturbed me, but that was not what I saw.

“Kloan! What is this?”

I stared into the water. The reflection distorted and unfocused from the ripples off my form. It was clear enough. No towering Xixian shape with eyestalks and purple spots greeted me. Rather, a brown-skinned woman. She dressed in flowing, ebony robes, sporting a white coif over her head. The woman was in her early twenties with dark irises. Thick black hair hid beneath the head covering. My mind flitted through Earth’s history and data.

“Looks like they made us Catholic nuns,” came a breathless voice as Kloan crashed into me.

She was bent double from exertion, still naked but much drier after her wild run. Her reflection in the stream showed another nun.

"Who disguised us as religious figures? Why?"

"Waythrel, you aren't quite ready for the *who* of the matter. Why nuns? I have no idea. We're from Mexico, I'd bet." She strolled over to her clothes and began to dress.

I stared back and forth between our reflections and our bodies. "Our true forms are not shown at all to this world, yet they are to us."

"Yeah, seems," came a muffled voice as she threaded herself into her beige robes. "I think because this is *pre-contact* Earth, we're both just a little too much for them." Her head popped out of the top with a grin. Sparse orange hair flapped around her, wires and tubing glinting in the sunlight. "You wouldn't believe what the little fields can do."

Her smile continued to unsettle me.

I stood still another moment. Realizing I would deduce little more from this strangeness, I entered the water. While I worked to remove the congealing molasses, Kloan turned more serious.

She scanned the horizon. "There's a town nearby. I can feel them," she said. "Small place. I think we're in the Midwest of America, near the time of the Calamity. All these," she gestured to an ocean of manicured plots of corn and other crops, "are the last little farms of the independents. Big Ag left a whole other kind of footprint."

My efforts at hygiene became a greater quest than Kloan's. I had waited longer, the gel hardening. My massive build and more numerous appendages increased the challenge. The strange material had wormed its way through cloth and under my translator. It coated every surface of my body. Several eyestalks struggled to stay focused on the cyborg.

"How do you know all this?"

"It's part of our training. I'm supposed to know all about Ambra Dawn. Her world, the environment that shaped her, it's all a critical component, you realize. Now that I'm here in this timeline, it's so easy to access the recent past. We had a lot of things wrong at Clone

School. I'm learning so much." She shrugged. "That's the whole point, of course."

She was a carefree human child and an impenetrable enigma. Her eyes were wide, and she stood on her toes, gazing outward with anticipation. It was difficult to see her as a monstrous product of an assassin training program.

"Leaky-brains," she whispered. "I'm never what you think I am. *Ever*."

I paused from my decontamination. While her words were innocuous, they sent a chill through my emotional centers. Nothing was as it seemed with this clone.

She snickered. "The great Waythrel. The great, *gooey* Waythrel of Xix. Hurry up! We need to find out where she is."

All my eyestalks turned to her. "Where who is?"

Kloan frowned at me like one would a slow child.

"*Ambra*, of course. We're not here for Old Earth corn."

Chapter 6

"The world, marm," said I, anxious to display my acquired knowledge, "is not exactly round, but resembles in shape a flattened orange; and it turns on its axis once in twenty-four hours."

"Well, I don't know anything about its axes," replied she, "but I know it don't turn round, for if it did we'd be all tumbled off; and as to its being round, anyone can see it's a square piece of ground, standing on a rock!"

"Standing on a rock! but upon what does that stand?"

"Why, on another, to be sure!"

"But what supports the last?"

"Lud! child, how stupid you are! There's rocks all the way down!"

David Hume

We set off along the stream in a direction Kloan had chosen. The day was warm by human standards, and her sparse hair matted to her instrumentation. Sweat dripped down her head, staining her robes. The bulge of her tumor shone like a boiled egg in the bright sunlight.

While I welcomed the heat, the humidity counterbalanced the warmth. The local weather and enormous water expenditure from irrigation saturated the air. The journey was uncomfortable.

For the hundreds of years I had spent on New Earth, I had avoided the more humid climes for all but the briefest visits. I longed for the Sahara, a climate closer to Xix itself. In Nebraska, my skin sacs clogged with liquid. Obtaining oxygen strained my system and reduced my stamina.

Within an hour, we reached a small roadway. It crossed a stream over a dilapidated bridge. Kloan stepped to the road and walked across the decaying structure.

"It's not far now," she said, increasing her pace.

I rested a moment, holding onto a protective railing. Its metal was rusted and warped from years of neglect. The air was pregnant with vapor. A suffocating blanket, it had become a wall to my psychology. I struggled to continue but forced myself forward.

The landscape changed little over the course of the day. Scattered houses and barns. Endless plots of corn. Parched fields gulping water provided by the irrigation systems. Birdsong and wind gusts punctuated the whisper of swaying stalks. Or at times a sharp pop as the fibers expanded from heat or growth.

A vehicle approached as we neared exhaustion. A battered pickup dispersed a cloud of dust and pulled to a stop to our left. In the bed of the truck, a group of workers sat huddled, staring at their feet.

"Mornin'," came a rough voice from within the cab. A broad hat leaned toward the passenger side. A burned and leathered face peeked from under it, an aquiline nose leading the charge. "You ladies need a ride?"

I assessed the situation. I checked our reflection in the vehicle's windows, confirming our external disguises. The driver seemed safe and would carry us without incident. Assuming nothing of our true natures could be gleaned by our proximity. I began to weigh strategies when Kloan decided for us.

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, every bit the foreign nun she

likely appeared to be. "Do you know how far Flache-Schale is from here?"

Ambra's hometown. How had she known?

Been scanning the past around here, Waythrel, and this nice man's memories.

"It's right up the road, ma'am."

Kloan put her hand to her chest, grasping a small wooden cross hanging from her neck. "Oh, this is good news. We're lost and very tired."

"Hop on in."

I moved toward the bed of the truck, but the driver called out.

"No, sister! You don't wanna be sittin' back with any of those. You two come on up front."

Kloan repeated thanks to the man. Several of the men in the back drew my glance. Migrant workers, I assumed. Latino. Their bodies were broad from the manual labor but subdued, slumped. A dim light remained in their eyes for the harsh lives they lived.

"Hermana." A deep voice.

The sound came from the back of the truck bed. An older man tipped his hat to me. One of the younger laborers kicked a man next to him. A soft chorus—"*Hermanas*"—spilled from the group. All eyes were downcast. Unprepared with the proper cultural protocol, I turned back toward Kloan and followed her into the cab.

"I'm Rick," said the driver as I closed the door, sandwiching the cyborg between us. "Headin' into town myself. We'll be there in ten minutes."

The gear shifted with friction, and the truck lurched forward. I could sense the stumbling of the migrants in the back as the sudden movement threw them backward. My gaze traveled instinctively to the passenger side mirror. I continued to be amazed at my appearance on this world. In the chipped glass, I was a young Latina nun. Rick had allowed entry to a monster and a child Frankenstein without the slightest concern.

"You headin' to the Catholic church on River Road? You're nuns, right?"

Let me talk, Waythrel.

"Yes, sir." Her voice squeaked in shyness.

"Well, I've got to get these boys over to the Milson farm, so I can drop you as far as downtown. Folks will get you to where you need to be."

After our slow plodding, the cornrows dashed past in harsh geometric patterns. The fields thinned, and the number of houses proliferated. The town was near.

Kloan dipped her head. "We appreciate the help. It's good of you to accept strangers so warmly." Her quick assimilation of cultural norms was astounding.

The driver laughed roughly, eyeing the review mirror. "Well, you two will be more welcome than these aliens, anyway."

Chapter 7

The Sages reveal to the aware that the imaginative faculty is also called an angel; and the mind is called a cherub. How beautiful this will appear to the sophisticated mind, and how disturbing to the primitive.

Maimonides

The truck rattled off, spraying us with fumes and dust. The wonders of eTech had made slow inroads into the farmlands in this period, despite the complete adoption of electric cars on the coasts. Downtown reflected this allergy to modernization. The dying independent farm communities were frozen in the middle twenty-first century.

The flurry of shocked expressions and subsequent darting eyes unnerved me. It was soon clear this was not due to our true forms but rather those imposed on us. It helped that every few minutes some passerby would smile and speak a welcome.

We had debated our course of action. I still had no idea why we were here, why we were nuns, and what we were to do about it all.

There was no sign of Synphel or the other clone. No indication of previous visitation through the gate. No reciprocal portal to return us from this reality that, for all I understood about cosmology, could not exist.

Kloan insisted everything had to do with Ambra and she particularly needed to find her. However, a plan to bring a False Dawn near the Daughter unsettled me. It didn't matter that we occupied a strange, impossible timeline.

With nothing else to present as an alternative course of action, I acquiesced. We set out for the Dawn's farmland.

That was when the priest found us.

We had planned to walk the journey, as I wanted minimal contact with the inhabitants. She estimated an hour to reach the farm. As we made our way through the town, a bearded figure raced toward us from a side street.

He was in his middle fifties, draped in a brown monastic habit. A wooden crucifix dangled as he lumbered across traffic to our position. Horns blared as he issued a series of distracted apologies, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on us.

"Looks like someone's been expecting us," said Kloan, smiling. "This should be interesting."

We stood still and observed the spectacle until the man stumbled to a stop, panting a few feet in front of us. My eyestalks divided between the girl and the priest. He was bowing.

"Please," he gasped. "There's little time. This is not the place to talk."

"You knew we were coming?" I asked.

He straightened, fear in his eyes. "Yes, of course. The Lord has revealed his path to me."

I pressed him. "You have received divine revelation concerning our visit?"

His eyes darted around toward the ambling pedestrians, snapping back to us. He licked his lips. "Be merciful; do not test me here."

"What have you seen?" Perhaps he was a latent Reader and had experienced foresight of our travels.

"Dreams," he said, his eyes haunted. "Terrible nightmares. You must know there isn't much time."

"Time for what?" I asked.

His right hand went instinctively to his cross, and he grasped the pendant like a talisman. "I am a humble servant of the Lord. I beg you. I do not understand the visions. The powers comprehend them," he mumbled. "The Almighty knows."

The cyborg child-nun smiled. "We'll go to your church then? Yes?"

He bowed, ushering us in the direction he had come. "Please, this way. We retreat to the house of God. Before the evil arrives. We shelter under the protection of his wings."

He began to jog across the street.

I spoke to Kloan. "What is coming?"

She shrugged and motioned for me to follow.

We darted through the decaying infrastructure, cloaked cultists dashing at doomsday. The priest's words weighed on me as I considered all the dangerous possibilities. Dram agents aware of our arrival? They controlled the planet, but their numbers were few. Their ability to monitor the entire world was therefore limited. How could they know of us so soon? Had forces of the Anti, or something worse, pursued us? Kloan's cryptic talk of gods and monsters was not comforting. This clergyman had expected us. Had others as well?

After several blocks and turns, we entered a tree-lined street. A church was now visible ahead on the left. Splayed sunlight from branches painted a dappled pattern over the stone facade. Children on bicycles darted over the road. Mundane sounds of the community mingled with my anxiety, creating a disturbing dichotomy.

The sign in front of the building read "Saint Anne's Catholic Parish." The priest paused before it, finding relief. He exhaled and rested his hand on the wood.

He turned toward us, his smile quavering. "I'm sorry for this

rush. Please excuse my rudeness. I am Father Geoffrey," he said bowing again. "You likely already know everything about me." He stared at us in awe.

The cleric believed we possessed extensive knowledge far beyond our measly confusions. It seemed a mistake to clarify our own ignorance at this stage, although I knew of no way to feign omniscience.

I glanced to my traveling companion for guidance, but she was distracted. Her posture was rigid, her eyes closed, a strained expression on her face.

"Kloan?" I said, touching her shoulder.

She spoke from a distance. "Father, thank you. Why don't we enter the church now, and hope it provides the protection you believe it can."

His face fell.

My own feelings echoed his own. I turned to face her. "What's going on?"

She opened her eyes. The irises glowed green. "Wormhole, Waythrel. Very close. It's opening now, and it's not empty."

Chapter 8

He had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings, and no cause to value the one above the other.

H. P. Lovecraft

"Into the church!" said Father Geoffrey, running forward. He clenched his hands into fists, stuttering his steps to avoid tripping over his robes.

We followed the rushing priest at a less manic pace. He led us away from the majestic entrance portals and around the side of the structure. We stopped in front of a small wooden door. He dug into his vestment pockets.

Kloan tried to calm him. "The tunnel is immature, still ripening. Nothing will come through immediately. Maybe we have an hour. They'll also have to find us."

He glanced over his shoulder as he fumbled with keys to the door. "What foul creatures are spilling from that pit of hell?"

"Hard to say," said the cyborg in full deadpan.

I considered our monstrous forms, undoubtedly demonic to this poor parish priest. How were we going to deal with this charade and whatever was coming through the wormhole?

"Here!" he said, brandishing a scratched key. He unlocked the door and scrambled inside, flipped a light switch, and dashed to a telephone.

"Good thing we still have the old landlines," he said. "Cellular has been on the fritz all day with static. Interference, if you ask me," he added, firing us a conspiratorial glare.

It was a small kitchenette, hardly spacious enough for the three of us, and the table in the middle of the room. Statues of the crucified Christ hung on the walls. A religious calendar was affixed with magnets to a chugging refrigerator.

"Who are you calling?" I asked.

His eyebrows jumped. "Why, the Dawns, of course," he said, listening as the phone rang on the other end. "I will tell them to bring Ambra as soon as possible." Again, the quizzical expression as we remained silent. "For the baptism." He began speaking into the handset.

Baptism. She was an infant in this space and time! She had been headed here all along. We might have missed her had we gone straight to the farmhouse.

"Missing whatever is coming for her," said Kloan.

Father Geoffrey ended the call. "Yes, you know." He squinted at us. "Of course, you know. Why must I doubt? Where is my faith?" He placed his hands to his head and shook it as if trying to throw off some raging headache. "God's messengers. You are His emissaries. I do believe!"

"We are divine envoys?" I asked.

"Angels." He glanced at each of us in sequence. "Seraphim from heaven sent to save the child."

"We are not what we seem?" I asked.

He appeared burdened by the question. "You are nuns. Simple

sisters visiting from the Hermanas de Juana Inés de la Cruz. I see this. I have the papers in my office," he trailed off, staring at us. "Behind your faces...I have seen in the dreams. The awful visages of the seraphim." He placed his fingers over his mouth. "Why does the Lord test me?"

Kloan walked forward. "Please sit down, Father. Let us talk openly at last."

The priest's eyes widened in fear and anticipation. We took seats in the small room, the metal chair legs grating on the floor.

She took his hands in hers. "Father Geoffrey, this is going to be hard to understand, but even for angels, the power of God is overwhelming. Sometimes, for some of the lesser powers, when we are sent by the divine, it is a difficult journey."

"Difficult?"

She spoke as if to a child. "Yes. Our nature, so miraculous to your own, is still finite. Still traumatized by the infinite splendor of the godhead."

Awe crossed his face, and wonder filled my mind at her deftness. I had become relegated to the status of a nymph by a creature I first considered but a gifted juvenile. The cyborg absorbed cultures, mythologies, mannerisms. People's subliminal fears. She did so in the span of hours. She refracted those back in prismatic conversation that served her own purposes.

What *was* Kloan?

"What is it you wish from me?" he asked.

"We have lost much of what we knew before we came. God has a plan, yes?"

He bobbed his head.

"Your dreams, the ones tormenting you, they hold the information we require. Please, tell us now the content of your nightmares, down to the darkest detail."

A moan escaped the priest. "No, have mercy on me, I can't! Don't make me describe them. I see them also in the light of day!" He began to shake.

I interjected, trying to find a voice in this strange quest. "You do not need to speak, Father. Give your permission and open your thoughts to us. We may read your experiences as one might a book."

"You can do this? Forgive me, I can't but doubt." He shook his head. "All is possible to God. Yes! My body, my heart, my mind are in God's service. I am your servant." He grasped our hands and closed his eyes, convinced the process would be painful or draining.

Kloan's consciousness dug. We plunged into the priest's awareness as she homed in like a missile on the swirling chaos of his visions. Colored by his own metaphors, myths, and fears, they spun a nightmare of demonic invasion. Rips in the fabric of nature, vile creatures from the fiery pits setting foot on the soil of mortals. Two demons dragged their scaled forms across land and water. They blackening crops, turning rivers to steam, laying waste to anything in their path. That path ended before the unmistakable form of the church we now occupied.

On this religious house, a light shone from all directions. The radiance emanated from the spaces between space, beyond the reality they entered. Monstrous yet holy shapes stood in the middle of the glow. Many armed and eyed, they blocked the doorway and refused entrance to the hell-beasts. Behind them, inside, resting on a throne, were a mother and infant. Not the Virgin Mary, but a farmer's wife with red hair. In her arms was not the Christ child but a baby girl with skin white like porcelain.

The dreamscape quaked from the terrible roar of the creatures outside the church. The air rippled at the hatred they unleashed. The dark forms advanced, frothing clouds rushing in with them. Lightning, thunder, fire, and blood rained against the parish walls. In front of them, the envoys of light brightened. A transcendent crescendo rose unseen. The essence of space was pregnant with power and poised to snap like a stretched string.

We careened back to the kitchenette, holding hands with the priest. The dream was gone. The humming of the refrigerator replaced the nightmarish noises. Father Geoffrey opened his eyes.

"Is this all?" I asked, anxiety reducing my patience. "What happened next?"

He shook his head. "It always ends there. I can't see beyond this horrible moment." His eyes pleaded. "This is what you need? Now you can tell me what it means?"

I glanced toward Kloan. I was as baffled as the priest and hoped she knew something I did not.

"It means a battle is coming today for the life of the child," she said. "For the life of Ambra Dawn. You had guessed correctly, Father. Terrible powers will arrive soon and seek to unmake a glorious history of God's plan."

Forces of the Anti, Waythrel, came her thoughts in my mind. *They have long sought this reality to kill her before she became the Daughter.*

"And you," he said, indicating the both of us, "are the servants of the light? Like the dream? You will defend her?"

Kloan stood. "You've seen our true forms during your dreams. We bring formidable power here."

The priest crossed himself.

"We will stand in the doorway and do battle with those who seek the destruction of the girl."

Chapter 9

Do not say, "Draw the curtain that I may see the painting." The curtain is the painting.

Nikos Kazantzakis

The thin walls rippled from a repeated impact, flesh pounding wood. Father Geoffrey jumped, his skin pale. He faced the door connecting the kitchenette to the church. Unsure how to proceed, he froze in place.

"It's the child and her mother," said Kloan with a bright flash in her eye. "They're at the front doors."

"God have mercy, they're here already," said the priest. He scampered forward to the church proper.

Following close behind, we entered the sanctuary. It was a small building, holding five rows of pews. The ceiling was high, lending a sense of grandeur to an otherwise humble space. The decoration was sparse. Stained-glass windows depicted saints and events from the life of Jesus. Polished statues gleamed about the altar, the nave, and the

narthex. A listing of the beatitudes glinted in marble and hung on the wall beside the main entrance.

This we approached. Kloan glowed with some unseen potential. She leaned forward and brushed the wood with her hand. I felt she would reach through the portals and grasp those on the other side. Unnerved by her behavior, I neared, watching her and the priest.

Father Geoffrey released the numerous locks studding the double doors. With a grunt he pulled inward, the old timbers crackling with dust. Sunlight poured into the dim chamber through the opening crevice. The radiance outlined a dark silhouette.

Ambra Dawn was carried in, cradled in her mother's arms, sound asleep with an angelic tranquility on her face. The infant was still a newborn, perhaps into her second month. A thick mane of bristled scarlet covered a significant portion of the cranium. She was clothed in a white dress, a thin band with a flower tied around her head.

I suppressed a deep urge. I longed to go to the child, to hold this nymph-form of the being I loved and had lost to the cosmos.

"Father Geoffrey," said the mother, out of breath, not yet noticing our presence. "I came as fast as possible. I haven't told Frank. He's away to Omaha looking at a new harvester. He'd kill me with the scheduled date just a few days away. My entire family is going to have it with me!"

He placed a shaking hand on her shoulder. "Thank you for trusting me, Cleena, and believing your own instincts." He motioned to us. "These are the two I mentioned."

She gasped. "The nuns from my dream."

The priest grimaced. "You see, my friends, there has been much stirring in the cornfields of Nebraska the last months." He turned back to the mother. "Let's get you in and close those. It's no longer safe outside." He pushed the groaning portals back together, slamming them shut. A rumbling echoed through the church.

"It is not secure *inside*," said Kloan. "Especially in front of the doors. We must bring the infant to the sanctuary, the altar. After that, there will be little time before they arrive."

Cleena stiffened. “Who will come? I haven’t been able to sleep since the birth! Dreams of running with Ambra, always the two of you alongside. Why are you here? What will happen?”

The cleric motioned forward. “Let’s get her away from the entrance and into the heart of the church. We don’t have much time.”

She carried the baby. What answer could any of us give her that would be comprehensible? The vague threat her latent Reader powers sensed brought her to this place and time. I hoped her trust was not misguided.

Many factors conspired to infect me with the anxiety plaguing the priest and mother. The encroaching presence of the Anti. The fearful whispers and dreams of these humans. The repeated proclamations of danger. Fear had rooted within me.

The walls of the church shrank. I imagined the forces searching for the child converging on our position. A foreboding hung in the air, a dark electricity worming its way into my deepest awareness. Whatever would happen was imminent.

The Daughter’s mother placed the infant behind the altar as the clergyman prayed.

Kloan took my hand and led me to stand before the pair, facing outward toward the entrance. “It’s time, Waythrel. They’re here.”

We all felt it. Something unclean stalked in the darkness. Geoffrey paused his prayers, glancing over his shoulder. Cleena Dawn held her newborn to herself and closed her eyes. She repeated the litany abandoned by the priest.

A terrible breath of silence.

Blasting inward, the massive doors shattered into a thousand fragments.

Chapter 10

She who knows does not speak;
she who speaks does not know.

–老子 Lǎozǐ

Sawdust rained through the small church. Wooden shards embedded themselves like released arrows in the pews nearest the entrance. Cleena Dawn screamed, and the baby, startled, wailed. Ambra would cry for the duration of this mad encounter until a final, terrible silence.

The dust cleared. Through the doors, two forms entered. Teenaged girls, red-haired, pale-skinned, and green-eyed. A cyborg's intubated, computerized cranium topped each.

"They sent clones," I said, a chill running through me.

A dancer well-versed in the steps of a choreography, Kloan eased down the middle aisle. The carnage did not faze her.

The pair paused as she approached. Undulations of spacetime rocked me as the three creatures sparred in unseen realms. There was

no overt violence as of yet, but I felt the growing tension as the combatants probed their opponents.

"Give us the child," said the clone on our left. "Surrender her, and you may go. If you resist, we will destroy you."

The false nun said nothing.

I was unsure which form the invaders saw. Without doubt, our *fields* presented the human disguises. Could they tear through the trickery concealing our true natures? What would they do if they knew Kloan was one of them? If they attacked, would she be able to defeat them?

"I said, hand us Ambra Dawn," the cyborg continued in a whisper, stepping forward and raising her arm.

"Wait!" said the other, grasping her hand while staring at Kloan. "What are you?"

"A Reader who seeks to meddle and overestimates herself," said her twin.

"No," said the second. "Don't you see it?" Her brow furrowed. "There is something different. Something *deep* here."

Her anxiety deepened, and she took a step back.

"*You* made the path. You found Old Earth. Didn't you? We followed. We'd given up finding a passage." The clone swallowed. "What *are* you?"

Still, Kloan remained silent. The False Dawns surveyed the rest of us. They ignored the other humans, paused on the infant, and examined me.

The more perceptive cyborg continued. "Something hiding in this one, but I detect it is not much of a threat." She turned back to Kloan. "You are different."

Tortuous seconds dripped by.

"Are you here for Ambra Dawn?"

Silence.

"Have you come from another time path?" asked the first, infected by her copy's hesitancy.

"There would be no conflict in our missions," offered the other.

"Why do you shut your mind to us?"

"Together we can break your will and take the child by force. We *will* take her. We *must*. I sense you know this. Step aside, help us." She extended a hand and let it fall. "Or die."

The temperature in the room dropped. Objective or subjective, I could not determine. Was it some unseen engagement or my own heightened fear? Whichever, the parameters of space and time tightened. A taut bow. The tension growing to a breaking point. An arrow moments from release. The baby cried out in pain.

"She won't allow us in," said the first, her voice strained, beads of sweat on her brow.

"So be it," said the second.

Existence detonated.

Because spacetime became both a weapon and a victim of assault, I cannot say how "long" this conflict lasted. Minutes? Judging from the final carnage, it was a reasonable guess. Or was it millennia, hopping in tubes and bubbles of punctured chronology? In the impossible distortions that followed, reason no longer mattered. Causality collapsed. Meaning vanished in this epic restructuring of reality.

I was as useless as I had been in the attack on Dram. While infinity opened to swallow the space in front of me, I tried to locate Ambra. I might not be able to battle these goddesses, but I could at least find the baby. Perhaps help protect it from the seismic assaults.

Before I could act, I was thrown to the ground. Light, sound, and stimulus unknown rocked my awareness. My eyestalks struggled to rise from the floor. Gravity on the world had increased tenfold. I saw extensive damage to the church. Pews were in disarray, flattened. The wreckage approached the sanctuary but failed at the sacred space.

The priest was gone. Had I seen him step forward and approach the intruders? I could no longer be sure in my disorientation. Cleena Dawn was there, unconscious, flat on the carpeted surface near the altar. I could not see the baby.

Slowly—or quickly—eventually, the spacetime chaos slackened. A growing warmth emanated. I managed to turn my body around and raise my eyestalks, glancing toward the entrance.

The roof of the church and the entire front wall were gone. Splintered wood and cement floated, defying gravity, yet scattered as if by a frozen blast. Each piece of the wreckage rotated in the air. The nearby houses, trees, parked cars——all were untouched.

Suspended over Kloan were two bodies. Bracing their backs, elements of the pulverized structures were repurposed. Thousands of splinters and chunks rearranged and amalgamated. Unknown forces glued them together, fashioning planks at ninety-degree angles behind the two attacking clones. Stained shards from shattered windows pierced their hands and feet. They hung motionless, with heads bowed. Circlets of smaller glass needles around their crowns, dripping blood.

Crucified.

Kloan waved her arms, and the constellation of random, hovering materials dropped to the ground. The march of time lurched into gear again. The lifeless bodies defied physics and continued to hang on their crosses.

"Ironic and satisfying imagery of death, I think." She grinned. Moving away from the fantastical nightmare, she walked toward me.

The contrast in my thoughts between this child and Ambra struck me. The Daughter existed in some personality space, sharing little with this creature. Ambra could kill and undertake raw, violent acts, but it was always in the defense of those who resisted the Dram and Anti. This creative slaughter hanging like macabre art disturbed me.

In the midst of my shock, I heard the baby cry again. I turned to the sound.

"Find the priest," said Kloan, taking my arm. "I'll tend to the mother and infant."

My heart yearned for Ambra, but I was becoming accustomed to following Kloan's lead. I searched across the wreckage of the church.

The building continued to stand, despite losing significant supporting structure. I hoped the cleric was not underneath some of the larger piles of rubble.

He was not. I found Father Geoffrey. What remained of him.

Chapter 11

The two principles of truth, reason and senses, are not only both not genuine, but are engaged in mutual deception.

Blaise Pascal

The tidal forces unleashed in the conflict had caught the poor priest at their most brutal. I found Geoffrey, parts of him——his upper torso and head still together——prone atop a heap of pew debris. Other remnants of his flesh were scattered about the room. His chest was eviscerated, the muscle and bone mashed and torn like some soft dough.

I do not suffer the same horrified reaction as humans to a visceral death of your kind. Nevertheless, the massive trauma to the physiology of this creature elicited pity. His demise was sudden, at least.

I heard the baby wailing, followed by sounds of Kloan moving objects behind me. I could not focus on the infant or her mother. I could not take my eyes away from the priest.

"Why did you leave the sanctuary, old man?" I whispered to the

corpse. Respecting human traditions, I closed his eyes, but he hardly seemed at rest.

I recalled the terrible plans I had developed with Ambra, in another space and different time. We had raced to counter the coming attack on New Earth. Our studies had found evidence that something miraculous, something horrible, something completely *other* was possible. *The Gathering of Souls.* Had she taken the final, hellish step to climb toward a nirvana?

Would the priest's consciousness find its way to a grand collective? *Would we all?* Or would we thrash in the void until our sentient fields lost all coherence? One was a kind of hell. The other something I hoped would be a heaven.

My eyes turned back to the lurid abominations hanging above the carnage. Memories dashed through my mind of clone hordes descending on us in the Dram desert. In particular, the one clone Ambra had tried to reach, to reason with, to love in the face of all the torture and mutilation the creature had suffered. The False Dawn she had *failed* to save.

The laden crosses rotated above me. Kloan had hung them like trophies of war. Yet they were once conscious beings who began their lives in innocence. Despite the biological distortions of the Anti. The birthing warehouses. The hormone and nutrient soups warping normal gestation and development. As a Xix, I had to believe in their pure origins.

Original sin?

Was it not a human theological idea? Tainted without choice, before sinning. *Born guilty*, doomed to condemnation. It seemed a horrible doctrine devoid of justice, one any of my kind would immediately reject.

I walked to the crucified clones and touched a dangling foot. In spite of my height, the reach strained my limbs. The sole was warm. My twelve digits stuck to blood still dripping from the wounds. My slight pressure caused the corpse to pivot in the air.

Are these ever to be saved?

Now their minds were adrift. Consciousnesses so distorted they may never hope to find citizenship in the Group Mind, whatever it had become. Sentience warped to hate and madness. Creatures born and condemned by a horrific, cosmic original sin. Souls incarnate into damnation.

I could not imagine the Daughter casting them to the void. I knew the weakness of my species, our need for harmony and healing. Not all life in our galaxy shared such a commitment. Humans could be both as loving as the Xix and as monstrous as the Dram. Conflicting behaviors often erupted from the same individual.

Yet I had communed with Ambra. I had loved her for three centuries, merged with her in the Group Mind. Her personality echoed in my awareness. I could not believe she would not find a way, if a way existed, to bring all minds into the fold. Inherent and permanent loss was too horrible a fate to contemplate.

Echoing my distress, the baby shrieked. It screamed in a manner I, a divergent life-form, recognized as distinct from the previous cries. My eyestalks flung toward the frightening sound. Thoughts raced. Had her mother perished? Had Ambra been injured in the melee? Or, perhaps, had she sensed with her infant powers the terrible cry within my soul?

I froze in place facing the sanctuary. My limbs dropped to my side. A strange sensation throbbed deep inside me. Was my cellular structure disintegrating? Melting and flowing into the debris and body parts already littering the ground?

The baby lay on the marble table, unmoving, crimson patterns splashed across her white dress. A long, gruesome gash ripped through her neck, scarlet bubbles frothing from the airway. A burgundy liquid oozed over the altar surface. It pooled at the edges and dribbled down the sides of the tablecloth.

The mother was unconscious, but most of my eyes locked on Kloan. Her eyes were wide and still, robes splattered. Her right hand brandished a stained carving knife. The blade pointed outward,

glinting and maroon. Small drops of the infant's blood dripped to the ground from its tip.

Behind me, a wet impact and shudder. Several eyestalks swiveled backward and spied the fall of the two crucified clones. Their bodies sprawled alongside the priest. Dust and gore sprayed into the air, sprinkling me with a thin layer of crimson clay.

The world should end. My halting words sounded shrill through the translator.

"Kloan——*what have you done*?"

Chapter 12

The laws of physics might permit the existence, in the real Universe, of closed time-like curves. The semiclassical laws of physics should be augmented by a principle of self-consistency.

Novikov et al, "Cauchy problem in spacetimes with closed timelike curves," Physical Review D, 42 (6), 1990.

Green eyes in the darkness.

Dizzy. Ripped from a dream and flung into a new reality, I stared at a night sky churning with stars in patterns I could not recognize. A soft breeze trickled over me. Sounds of alien creatures punctuated the whisper of wind. My eyestalks darted about, appraising the planet surface, the heavens, and the figure of the girl sitting beside me.

Kloan pulled in her legs. They obscured her head. Haunting gems peeked over bobbing kneecaps. Her arms wrapped around her shins. She rocked back and forth. I detected a faint sound with rhythmic pitch changes and repeating arrangements. Humming.

I bent my eyes to her.

"What have you done? *What did you do to Ambra?*"

The child continued to sway and hum, ignoring my question. Desperation flooded me.

"What did you do!"

The music stopped.

"Nothing."

"*Nothing?*" My eyestalks swiveled. "I *saw* you with a knife! *Blood* all over you and the baby. Next—light. It overpowered my senses. What happened? Where is the infant?"

"In a past. At a distance."

The intubated, tattooed head cocked to one side, the green eyes continuing to hold me in their grip. Tendrils of her thought danced around my awareness.

"You are probing my mind!"

The head remained at a forty-five-degree angle. She peered from behind her right knee. "Your thoughts leak everywhere. You Xix are leaky-brains."

The child leapt, catching me by surprise. She stood above me. Long, ragged clumps of scarlet locks dangled over her face.

"A first experiment. I was skeptical. The Anti always believed there were unstable nodes in time. This was one of their top targets. I kept telling them, but they wouldn't listen. It's not *then* that you have to worry about her, but at the *beginning*."

"You cut the throat of an infant as a test? You risked killing the Daughter, preventing your own existence. All because you doubted it was possible and wanted to see?"

"Mm-hmm."

I stared at the child, her innocence horribly deceptive. "You are a monster."

"Yes, I'm a monster. Don't you know that by now?" She bit her lower lip. "We're bred to kill Ambra Dawn from the moment we're cloned." Her eyes blazed. "It was easy to do, you understand? It would have been hard *not* to murder her. I'd need enormous

willpower not to, however strange it seems to you. Years of conditioning don't just go away. It will never go away."

"I thought you might be different." My heart felt broken. I *needed* her to be her own person.

"I *am* different, Waythrel. *Everything's* different with me, and you'll see. I let my instincts have their way because another part of me had to test something important."

The horror of the memory would not leave my mind. "Why did you battle the clones? They would have killed her for you."

"Probably, but I had to be sure. I couldn't tolerate their interference in the experiment."

"You plotted all along to murder a child."

"Not any child. *That* child. If it helps, I'd have little desire to kill a random infant."

It did not help.

"Poor Xix! I am a *very* specific monster. Precisely aimed. Ambra's unharmed. I'm here. So are you, which requires her survival and existence. Her actions. An entire tapestry of world lines, whole universes. Remember?"

The words were like a slap to my mind. *Phrases from a dream.*

"Where are we?"

"Don't you know?"

I wobbled up. Gazing at the ragged landscape, I saw a flat plain below. The lights of a city washed out the canopy of stars close to the horizon.

"We are back where we started. When you took me after Dram."

"*When* did we start, Waythrel?"

I stared at the deep green eyes. My sense of time, cause and effect, spun, disoriented. Memories strobed in a blurred fog. I could no longer discern what was real and what was in my mind.

"I am confused. Please explain to me what is happening. You seem to understand."

She exhaled, satisfied. "That's *why* we're here. *Data.* The next

data to enter the gate." She turned her back on me, walking down a steep slope. "Let's get started."

"With what? Where are you going?"

Kloan continued without turning back. Her words faded into the night. "To where it all began for me. To watch the beginning flow around us and mature and twist through time and space to come back to be us. Then we'll be ready for the next step."

The starlight cast sharp shadows on the dusty rocks. The figure of the child was gone, swallowed in the darkness. I stood frozen, trying to understand the madness of my own thoughts.

Did I know this creature? It seemed I did. We had journeyed in a dream. Traveled from Dram. Voyaged to Earth before it was New Earth. Battled monsters. Murdered infants.

Now we were here, as if I had arrived from Dram again. Was I lucid? Was the universe sane?

Waythrel, come on!

Her voice rang in my mind. My eyestalks curled on themselves. What else was there for me to do?

Chapter 13

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

Søren Kierkegaard

I raced after the child, my steps uncertain, the ground beneath me dust-covered and slippery. Descending the sharp incline, I stumbled and tripped. My four limbs clutched at stones and alien vegetation, slick as if oiled.

It's a field around you, remember?

Her thoughts danced through my mind.

It's skintight, coating your surfaces, insulating you from everything.

I fought to understand her words as memories bubbled. The strange sensation, her voice, walking up the slope to a shining disk in the light—*the gate*.

Rounding a boulder, I almost collided with her. Shattered rocks littered the terrain, leftovers from landslides off the craggy heights.

"What sort of coat? Why do we have it?"

Kloan peered below. A city or a military base carpeted the arid ground, shadows moving in formation through it.

"I don't know what kind. They make it for our protection."

"From what?"

She pointed to the compound. "Come. It's nearly day, but we're earlier this time." she said, shaking her head. "That's when it all begins. We'll go see me there, and then you'll see what happens."

As she moved toward the complex, I grabbed her, needing answers.

"Another clone facility?"

"Yes."

Memories flooded me.

"There is an attack! We cannot walk right into that place."

"There's no danger."

"Maybe not for you. *I* cannot. They will kill any Xix they see."

"They won't see us. We're invisible in these suits, remember?"

"*You* broke through Ambra's bubble."

Kloan shook her head. "Hers was simple. Primitive."

"Yours now is none of those things?"

"I told you, they're not *mine*. Now, come on!"

The child pulled me forward. Helpless, my mind whirled. Events were suspect—now, before, those to come. I distrusted my own thoughts. Would I understand any of this absurdity?

We covered the distance between the broken hills and the installation. The flat landscape made my efforts less exhausting. Rather than concentrate on each step, I observed the nearing fortification. It was unlike any city or technological society I had ever seen.

The laws of physics and chemistry are the same across the universe. As far as we have been able to ascertain, through time as well. But the mentality expressed here was more remote than I had encountered. In comparison, our galaxy of diverse life-forms appeared homogenous.

Architecture. Transport surface topology. The use of color and lighting. It bordered on cognitive hostility. I cannot describe it with more clarity.

Yet *humans* populated the place. I saw no other species. Two

classes of people, easily demarcated: those who resembled Ambra Dawn and those who did not.

"The Anti run things with robots and trained people," Kloan added.

No doubt she sampled my *leaky* thoughts.

"To avoid annihilation?"

I assumed it would be difficult to be in the presence of so much matter to their antimatter. The energies required to prevent planetary destruction would be enormous.

"No, they aren't concerned about it here," she said, not bothering to explain. "It's more efficient. Once they optimized the program, it ran with drones and lackeys."

We approached the entrance to the complex. Robotic guards patrolled the gate, hovering above the ground. Strange weapons protruded from multiple regions of their forms. To my relief, they did not notice anything unusual. Nothing in their technology pierced whatever cloaking mechanism concealed us. Inside were other automatons of odd shapes and designs. I soon noticed a pattern.

"Machines do all the work," I whispered.

Kloan spoke without concern for discovery.

"Humans are the social construct for the clones. See, we need people to develop, or the brain is too wrecked to become useful. Human neurophysiology needs communal fabrics, structures, language, norms. So the Anti imported them. It's a clone growth matrix, I guess."

"Like on Dram," I said, remembering the groups of cyborgs and others involved with them.

"Yes, a beginning. Before it was destroyed."

"Dram is gone?" My mind lurched.

"Terrible civil war. Blew themselves to bits. It didn't matter. They were an outpost."

"This is another one?"

"One of the last. The devil ball hunts them through space and

time. They had to build them farther away. Find stronger clones to shield them from attack."

"Devil ball?"

She smirked. "Your little Orbies. We had other names for them. Other thoughts about them. Come, you'll see. You'll *learn*."

We moved through the strange streets of this alien and yet human city. Groups of young Ambra Dawns paraded past us at various points. Older cyborgs shepherded them with the assistance of more diverse humans. While we walked, Kloan pointed out buildings or objects of significance.

"Inside these warehouses are the wombs. All clones are birthed there. They learned early that the gestational process was key to brain development. Purely in vitro methods were incredible failures." She smiled at me. "It's nice we're born and not grown, isn't it?"

I didn't know if the strange cyborg was serious or sarcastic. We Xix had mastered the translation of human conflict avoidance mechanisms, such as sarcasm. Uncertainty in interpretation often remained, however. With this clone, my previous experience mattered little.

"What we saw on Dram was much more horrible than nice, Kloan."

"You're a terrible student," she said in an odd tone. "But we can't have lessons now. We have to hurry!"

"Where?"

The child gazed into the distance. "Home."

Chapter 14

I see the blindness and the wretchedness of man. I regard the whole silent universe, and man without light, left to himself, and lost in this corner of the cosmos. Without knowing who has put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him at death, and incapable of all knowledge. I become terrified.

Blaise Pascal

"Home?"

"Or quarantine," she said. "Take your pick. With me locked in their little box, the compound thought itself protected."

She grabbed my hand and pulled me forward, sprinting. We darted across the bizarre avenues. I processed little until we reached a strange building unlike any of the others. It was small, a deep black—obsidian—reflecting little light. Churning electromagnetic forces pulsed around the structure.

"Safe from *you*? You mean all this shielding?"

"It's designed to keep me and my powers inside, yeah," she said.

"It was useful in the beginning, when I was very little. I never let them know my full strength. Come, I'll get us through the fields."

Kloan yanked and reality glitched. For an instant, my vision blurred. Events accelerated and stuttered as my Reader senses reeled. Eyestalks flailing, I failed to focus on anything. A kaleidoscope of images assaulted my consciousness.

"Waythrel, hold on to me."

She grabbed my arm and steadied me. The dizziness passed and my sight returned.

A single room greeted us, spartan, with a bed, table, toilet, and sink. No products for leisure. No children's toys. No books or electronic information sources. Bright light streamed in from a transparent region of the shielding. The system's star rose for the beginning of a new day. Sounds of explosions and shouts echoed outside. The room was in disarray. Clothes were strewn about, food and utensils as well. My olfactory strips detected a growing acrid smell. *Smoke?*

A child clone of identical appearance to Kloan stood in the middle of the room. Sweat beaded across her forehead. Her muscles tensed.

She gazed at a swirling vortex of milky light. My eyes stopped scanning; the stalks stilled. The impossible thing floating in front of the girl arrested all my attention. Thousands of faces and forms of myriad species bobbed in and out of sight in a violent sea of white fog. Many I could identify. Most I could not.

One I knew. The nacreous vapors coalesced around a central extrusion, a human face. The head was split open, the brain exposed behind it and fading into the mist. Tubes and wires, dwarfing the insertions into Kloan, entered and exited the skull. The eyes were partially obscured by machinery pulsing with a life of its own. The mouth was free.

"Ambra," I whispered in horror.

Despite all the Xixian technology covering and distorting her features, I recognized her. How could I not? How could I forget the

alien face I had loved and nurtured? My student. My teacher. Our hope for centuries.

For the first time, I faced the price she had paid in our desperate plan to save the galaxy from the Anti and Dram. My focus flipped between the phantasm and the two bodies of Kloan in the room. My lover Synphel had warned us. The others and I had half-listened. The weight of the truth crushed me. I began to suspect we had triumphed by *becoming* our enemies.

I parsed the stunning poltergeist. Our most brilliant minds had focused on the potent consciousness of Ambra Dawn. Their immediate purpose in the war was to enhance the Collective's synergy and power. Far beyond this, they worked toward a cosmic goal. *The Gathering of Souls*. A harvest of sentience across space and time.

That reaping would give birth to a novel awareness, a being of its own we could not model, imagine, or anticipate. Our theories failed in this extreme context. Recursive infinities plaguing the sophisticated mathematics and artificial intelligence simulations.

Because our understanding stumbled, we recognized the project could fail. It might even produce something terrible. We had gambled to create a god whose nature we could not predict or control. In the end, it was a collective I would never join. Kloan had torn me from that destiny.

Whatever it had turned out to be in those swirling faces, it was not Ambra Dawn. Regardless of her likeness in the face of this thing, it was not her. It was something with her at its heart but exponentiated beyond the seed of its formation. To sweep across time and space and reach this world? I trembled before the power of this consciousness. We had given birth to a godling. What I did not yet suspect, and would see as this journey wore on, was that we had produced both a heaven and a hell.

"The gate is prepared," came Ambra's voice.

"I'm ready," said the Kloan of this earlier time.

"You must leave now. They will return with greater numbers of

clones and more destructive weapons. They will force you to destroy them all if you engage."

"I don't want to kill them. Take me to the exit."

The stamping of rushing feet came from outside the small building. A heavy rumbling accompanied them. I imagined a sizable military vehicle.

Ambra's apparition pivoted toward the door of the quarantine cell. "Through the door."

The black field sealing the chamber gave way to a second churning vortex. It opened to span the width of the frame. Through it poured bright daylight. The city beyond her isolation unit vanished, replaced by a rocky terrain. It matched the landscape we had recently traversed.

The countryside within the whirlpool extended to the limits of my vision. At the end of the tunnel was a worn path on a steep slope. The vegetation was eroded, the rocks smoother, the coloration of the land distinct. The walkway rose up the hillside and ceased at an expansive disk. Sunlight gleamed off the surface. Blinding reflections bounced into the room and cast shadows on the floor.

Kloan pulled my arm, showing me that her temporal copy had entered the vortex. "The gate," she said.

I stumbled forward, blinded by the daggers of light glinting into the room. Shouts outside, and the walls began to smolder, glowing a bright orange.

"Good luck, my dearest friend," said the apparition of Ambra Dawn as I stepped within the passage.

My eyestalks bent backward to see the disembodied head turned toward me. Its motion sent ripples across the sea of blurred faces. Tears dripped from her eyes, coating the wires and tubes in her once-green irises. A bittersweet smile lined her face.

"I love you, Waythrel. Remember, whatever happens."

The room exploded.

Chapter 15

If all the parts of the universe are interchained in a certain measure, any one phenomenon will not be the effect of a single cause, but the resultant of causes infinitely numerous.

Henri Poincaré

Flames and rubble streaked toward me, obscuring the swirling god-thing in the room. While I waited to be pulverized, the portal shut.

We were far from the compound, a mile high into the rough hills and cut off from the melee below. Replacing the terrible rending of the explosion was a stunning silence. Pebbles rattled and shrubs groaned in wind gusts, muted until the next dance of air. A faint whiff of smoke that had entered the tunnel was all remaining of the carnage.

Shattered by Ambra's last words and stunned by the violence, I turned away from the vanished doorway. At the top of the slope waited the sparkling ring. Several feet above me, Kloan motioned to follow. No one else was visible.

"Where is the clone?"

"She's right here."

I paused, confused, my mind still in disarray. "This is where you left. When you went to kidnap me."

"Yup. I'm gone already through the gate, so I could come back with you." She smiled. "It's an elegant loop, yeah?"

"It is madness!" Recent events rushed through my thoughts. "Ambra is part of it all?"

"She's the heart of it all."

"It cannot be."

"You aren't the only one tested, Waythrel. Each time's different. When we finally understand, we'll see the way." She turned toward the disk. "Now's the next stage of the odyssey. And yes, a journey sustained by Ambra Dawn. Are you ready to continue?"

No. I was not prepared. I drowned in the memory of a dream. Had I not been here before? *To make a choice.*

"We have been here, just like this."

"Not *just* like, but we have been and will be. But never *just* like. Remember the nonnormalizable loop?"

"I am getting a sense of it." My eyestalks rotated to center on Kloan. "There was more. A hope. To go *back*. To find Synphel." I ached to think of my mate again.

"Yes. There was."

"So, we can remain here. Survive, avoid the Anti, someday to perish in this obscure sector of the cosmos. Or we can engage this portal. Risk eternal damnation to a self-referencing and altering timeline?" My mind considered the meaning. "Or have we already done that?"

"Yes and yes."

"You are coming with me?" I asked.

"That's the whole point."

I turned my attention to the gate, a deep uneasiness creeping through me. The disk reminded me of a cross-sectional slice of the Orb. The surface resembled a viscous, churning, honey-like fluid. I

glimpsed stars within it, endless depths of star fields bobbing in and out of an iridescent sea. The thing pulled at me as I gazed. It was monstrous and beautiful. I grasped the child's hand.

Kloan laughed. "Seems we'll always be dancing together, Xix."

My eyestalks wrapped around each other. The covering sheaths expanding, blocking out all light.

We walked into the gel.

Part III

My labor lingers long; the pay is poor.
From toil to sleep to toil the chanting brays.
A weariness invades to kiss my core.
A willing lover he has found and stays.

Except those eves inflamed by Holy Songs,
when Shaman Ones chant secrets in the night,
and cease to sing at brilliant birth of dawn—
in mysteries my weary mind delights.

Although at times their truths are hard to see,
and seem estranged from that my heart enfolds,
no doubt my profound ignorance blinds me,
I close my eyes and think as I am told.

Our Shaman Ones doubt not they spin the truth.
As for myself, I do not ask for proof.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 16

We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth.

William Anders

When my mind cleared, I woke in a recurrent dream.

Cornfields. A blue sky and humid summer. A rare hill in the Great Plains sloping to a gurgling stream. Kloan at the bottom, naked in the water, squealing, pulling huge handfuls of slime from her body.

"Waythrel!" she shouted, grinning up at me. "Don't wait so long this time!"

I shivered from the memories of the last trip. Doom and death. Attack and murder. I stared at the assassin frolicking in the cold waters. Nothing was ever as it seemed.

"Not here to kill Ambra this time! It doesn't work, remember? Come down before you solidify into some sort of permanent artwork!"

How do you continue with the rational, the practical? Some-

thing so basic and mundane as self-hygiene, when lunacy lurks at every turn? What was the point of a bath when monsters might be crucified in a few hours' time or a baby's throat slit? Or swirling clouds of souls materialize on worlds to which you have been kidnapped, embedding you in an endless time loop of psychosis?

I ambled down the hill. The cyborg raced and squealed, holding her robes in one hand like some wrecked kite she was trying to send aloft. I ignored her. I washed. I removed the globs of gate goo. Summoning my courage, I examined my reflection in the water.

I saw a child.

A blue-eyed girl with dangling black braids stared back at me with a puzzled expression. I glanced away, a blur of red rolling down the slope and laughing, distracting me. I gazed back. She was still there. Six or seven years old. Freckles and a mole on her right cheek.

"Kloan?"

She came to rest near me, grass stains coating her beige robes, sweat glistening over her flushed face. "More body image problems, Waythrel?"

"What are you this time?" I ventured.

"Same—little black-haired kid. I get a bow in my hair."

Frustration boiled inside me. "I find these facades troubling. What happened before..." I couldn't finish.

"Before what?" She bobbed her head in a syncopated rhythm. "When you uncover that absolute reference frame for *when*, please let me know, because all I can be sure of is *now*." She peeked at the water. "*Awww.* Pigtails, they call them. You make a cute girl for a squid, Xix!"

"Why are we here, Kloan? It is the same place."

Of all the possibilities for this journey, many in my mind bringing me closer to Synphel, returning to Old Earth had not occurred to me.

"Well, time moves on. Or does it?" she said, stepping away from the reflections. "We'll avoid the priests and baptisms. Skip on the

Ambra clones in this tangent. Don't think you'll see anything like that this time—except for me, of course. Ha!"

I rose from the brook. It was good to be out of a substance my species was both dependent on and uncomfortable with as desert dwellers. I longed for our sonic showers. She moved along the stream in a familiar direction.

"Why *are* we here?" I pleaded after her.

She called over her shoulder, "To make a new friend!"

It was not difficult to guess who this acquaintance might be. Everything in my experience connected with Ambra Dawn. I surmised with near certainty that the clone headed for her farm. To what purpose in this Old Earth reality, I could not imagine. The memories of destruction and murder hardly reassured me. In fact, they paralyzed me.

Kloan stopped, her shoulders slumped. She raised a leg and pirouetted, facing me. Plodding, she approached, her head bowed with fatigue. She came to a stop inches from my feet and crossed her arms over her chest. "Can't you keep your mind to yourself?"

"My thoughts are—"

"Look. Waythrel. This isn't easy. Not for you. Not for me. It's a rough reentry through atmo with nausea and some broken bones. We're likely going to do it for five and a quarter eternities. You need to do more than adapt. You *have* to see the bigger picture."

"Which is?"

"Well, that's hard to explain." Her smile returned. "You have to *see* it, even if you can't *understand* it. It's ridiculously important that you do."

The cyborg dropped cross-legged to the grass and beheaded a cluster of dandelions. She gripped the stems in one hand, the other poised over the yellow crowns like a bird of prey.

"Let's take stock. You're with a monster clone assassin thingy who kidnapped you across the universe."

Three fingers plucked a flower and tossed it behind her.

"One reading your mind, the minds of everyone around her, as well as times past and future."

Pluck and toss.

"Every now and again, she murders little babies."

Toss, toss, toss. Grin.

"I can see all this causing disquiet."

She took my hand, pulled herself up, and dragged me to the top of the hill.

"Where are we going?"

"Look, just look!" She gestured over the endless expanse of fields. "Over there—" she pointed near the stream, "—is a pile of cosmic gel I fished out of my girl parts. *Disgusting*. How does that figure here? It's all averaged out in tens of thousands of square miles where all the noise disappears. Instead, the big picture. It's a giant food carpet unsustainably managed for a planet with an energy resource problem."

"Kloan, what—"

"Shhh!" She put her index finger against my translator. "*Our* big picture—Waythrel, it's more than *big*. It's the universe. It's *more* than our everything. Other everythings. It's universes after cosmoses. An infinite set with uncountable numbers of interdependent gestations. Totalities we can't reach. Macrocosms where the laws of physics are weird. Where mathematics doesn't add up. Where logic is *illogical*." She bounced, waving her arms like manic windmills. "Two plus two is *not* four in the big picture! Do you understand?"

"I do not, Kloan. I am sorry."

"Yeah, well, I don't either. But I can *see* it. A billion tangents, a trillion loops to take. One after another. Everything that can happen will. It's not about *what happens*. Nothing ever occurs here after it does. It's what we take, what we *learn*, what we become."

"The journey is the reason, not the destination? I have heard this proverb many times."

"No! Of course, the destination matters. How stupid is that?" She shook her head. "You're not listening. It's not *what* we do in the

passage, because we'll do all things. It's how we *evolve* from it. How it sums. The final path."

"Besides to insanity, you mean? Because I fear I have foolishly entered a bottomless labyrinth that will break my mind."

"Yeah, maybe," she said, staring at me with the utmost sincerity. "But all the angels are mad, Waythrel—don't you know?"

She was off again, releasing my hands and striding back to the stream. Heading north, toward Ambra Dawn.

Chapter 17

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant?" Instead they say, "No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way."

Carl Sagan

We found Ambra.

We rounded a curve of monotonous cornrows. A stereotypical white fence framed a house over a verdant carpet. The property was large, no other houses in the field of vision. The grass was lush with chlorophyll, the cells swelled with regular watering. Decorative shade trees launched skyward across the lawn. A row of pines served as a natural wind guard on the western end of the plot.

In the middle of the sea of green floated a tiny ball of red. Her hair hung in complete disarray, long and tangled, victimized by a child who had yet to focus much attention on her appearance. Her

age matched our disguises. She was about seven years old, sporting a wrinkled, stained dress draped over a pair of blue jeans.

My mind reeled. I had been torn from her after years of struggle and loss. Imprisoned in this churning derangement captained by a godlike, transformed echo of Ambra. Chained to her unpredictable clone. The sight of her, innocent, unaware of her harrowing future—emotions overwhelmed. Affection coursed through my awareness. Against this warmth, an irrational current of ice fought. My eyestalks pivoted to the cyborg, fearing the worst.

"Relax, Xix," Kloan said, skipping forward down the road. "Been there, done that. I need to learn so much here and destroy something else."

I could not fathom why she would think such a response would help me remain calm. I raced behind, catching Kloan as she stopped in front of the picket fence. She rested both elbows between the pointed tops of the boards.

"Hi!" she yelled over the lawn with an enormous grin.

Ambra gazed from the ground in our direction. Her hands were in the grass. "Hi," she said, her expression neutral.

Silence enveloped us as the pair stared at each other across the green field. I assumed we appeared as three young children socializing in a pastoral scene. Our true forms would have terrified anyone watching.

The quiet continued. Neither of the two spoke or moved, yet neither acted uncomfortable or unsure. At last, Ambra rose, her palms cupped together like clamshells. She threw her windswept hair behind her with a flip of her head, puffing recalcitrant strands out of her face.

"Want to see a bug?"

"Yes!" said Kloan.

Before I could react, the clone scaled the fence and landed roughly on her feet. She raced toward her progenitor.

I had not thought through the strange disguises our mysterious handlers had foisted on us. I appeared every bit the small child. My

real form was something else. Towering over two meters, I weighed several times the average human adult. I also possessed far more appendages with greater sensitivity.

Climbing the barrier presented an interesting puzzle. Would this magical camouflage simulate structure as well as visuals? I could not think of how it could happen. Of course, I did not understand most of the technology of our powerful puppet masters. It was possible such a complete simulation might be within their abilities. My appearance could be matched with the mass and dimensions of a seven-year-old Earth child.

I dared not risk it. I took the long way around the fence to the open front gate and crossed the field toward the pair. They huddled together, examining something between them.

"Hurry, Waythrel," yelled Kloan. "Before it flies off!"

I lumbered forward, exhausted from the walk, the humidity, and the stress of the constant unknowns. I sat on the ground beside them.

We stared at a bug.

"It's a watermelon beetle," said Ambra. "We don't get too many here. This one is really late. Summer's nearly over."

The insect was over an inch long, thick and heavy. She placed it on her dress. She kept a fingertip pressed on its back and allowed it to shuffle up her chest.

"See, look, it has all these stripes. Dad says they can eat up the roots of trees and the corn, so I'll have to show him." She grabbed it between her index finger and thumb. The small creature hissed.

"Wow, what's that?" asked Kloan.

Ambra beamed. "Really neat, right? They hiss at you, like a cat. I guess it's mad."

She held the beetle to her face and stared at it. The bug was beating its wings as it spat again.

"Found it by the oak tree. Maybe it's already laid eggs." Her eyes flashed to the cyborg. "You're not from here, are you?"

A loaded question, huh, Waythrel?

"No, we're visiting," she said.

Ambra glanced back and forth between us. Her eyes stopped on me for some time. "You're really different."

Kloan's thoughts spoke again. *Her Reader powers are awake. She senses us.*

I wasn't sure what to say. I hoped she could not discern much about our true forms. I mustered my best. "I'm a good friend."

She turned to her clone. "Who are you?"

"My name is Kloan."

"Like Joan. But not."

"Exactly."

She returned to her bug again, tapping its wings, chanting in a singsong voice, "Like up but down. Like yes but no. Kloan and Joan are all alone."

"And heaven's sewn," said Kloan, their eyes meeting.

Ambra squinted. "Where are your parents?"

"Where do you think?"

The watermelon beetle hissed again.

"I don't think you have them." She glanced away. "I think you're fairies."

"Maybe we are."

Ambra moved in close, her expression conspiratorial. "Do you want to sleep over tonight?" Her eyes bored into each of ours. "I won't tell my mom and dad. I know you have to be secret. I can sneak you in the back door later if you hide in the corn."

Kloan tilted her head. "Where will we stay?"

Ambra's hands danced around her face. "In my room. We don't have to be there all night. Fairy magic is in the night! We can go play in the crops. You can show me things."

"You will need to sleep," I offered.

She frowned and stood. "I don't like sleeping." She was like so many children.

"We can have fun tomorrow. Sometimes you have to rest."

She continued to stare off into the distance.

Kloan shook her head. “It’s not about playing.” Silence. “She doesn’t want to dream.”

Ambra gaped at her with broad eyes, her eyebrows high. She stared at her until a tear rolled down her left cheek. “I knew you were fairies.”

Chapter 18

The illusion of the passage of time arises from the confusing of the given with the real. The passage of time arises because we think of occupying different realities. In fact, we occupy only different givens. There is only one reality.

Kurt Gödel, as quoted

To avoid her parents' eyes, she led us around the front lawn beside the fence. The route first took us farther from the house. As we entered the cornfields, Ambra doubled back toward the structure. How she navigated in the towering seed crops was a mystery. Her Reader powers were still nascent and raw. It was more likely her childhood experience in these plant labyrinths. Whatever the source of her infallible sense of direction, she was joyous as she ran through the rows.

"The corn is as high as an elephant's eye, an' it looks like its climbin' clear up to the sky," she sang. Often, she returned to retrieve us as we failed to keep pace, taking our hands and leading us forward at a run.

At times, she would stop and point out something about the crops. A towering shoot. Malformed stalks. She delighted at the maturing ears on the majority of the plants.

"Dad thinks we'll have them early this year, end of September."

Through small breaks in the tassels, we discerned the top of a two-story home.

As we approached, Ambra held her finger to her lips. "You never know where Dad's gonna be. So be quiet now. I'll go in and see where they are and come back."

She darted forward through the maize and disappeared. Kloan inhaled, her eyes gleaming. I fought again to understand this creature.

"Is this environment one you respond to favorably? Is there some component of your shared genetics predisposing you to comfort here?"

"I hate corn," she said, her grin unwavering.

It was hopeless.

"Yet you seem so pleased with things."

She sighed and turned to me. "I'm *learning*. Understanding the heart of Ambra Dawn in every little thing that happens in this place. That's what this is all about, Waythrel."

"Why?"

"Remember the data I mentioned? We're collecting reams, and me more than you. Because the ultimate purpose demands the deepest and most personal comprehension. An insight transforming my person in loving and hating another sentient creature."

"How can apathy be important? How can hatred go with affection?"

Kloan rocked on her tiptoes and stared into my eye cluster. "Does love exist without its antithesis? Can you conceive of empathy in the absence of cruelty? Is this reality complete lacking the Anti?"

Our metaphysical conversation ended as Ambra came bursting through the stalks. She wore a backpack across her shoulders and bent double to catch her breath.

"Sit down, let me show you." Her excitement was infectious.

We followed her lead and sat beside the corn. I balanced against one shoot, and the seven-foot-high plant tilted to the ground. Perhaps my true mass was indeed reflected in events on this world.

"We're baking like crazy for my aunt's visit tomorrow. Aunt Aideen came all the way from Ireland. She's never been here. Mom's going nuts. Dad hates hosting, and he's already grumpy about the whole thing. He's in the basement hiding, working on his carving." Our blank stares prompted her to continue. "He makes these little animal totems from wood with a knife. He's pretty good. When he gets upset, he always goes down there. A few hours later, up comes some owl head or turtle." She smiled.

"What's in the bag?" asked Kloan.

"Yes!" She untied the top of the pack and pulled out two things. One was a wooden globe, carved in detail with the continents of Earth in relief. "Dad made it for me when I started school. This one took him a whole week, and he got all these maps and globes to get it right. It's my favorite toy of all, and I'm never going to lose it."

I raised the other object she had brought. It was a hollow metal cylinder with a flue cut into the surface near one end. A dog's head decorated the other.

"Is this a musical instrument?" I asked.

"No. Maybe it looks a little like a flute," she said, turning the device in her hand. "But watch!"

She placed it to her mouth and formed a seal, blowing hard. Her cheeks puffed like a blowfish.

My acoustical disks reverberated with the high-frequency sound. It was not painful, but loud and piercing to my senses.

Kloan shook her head. "I don't hear anything."

Ambra put her index finger to her lips. "Wait."

Within half a minute, a series of thrashes sounded in the corn. From behind, a furry mammal rocketed through the air and landed in her arms. The dog licked her, overjoyed to be in her presence.

"This is Matt!" she said, trying to speak over the creature that was

all over her face. The animal rested momentarily and noticed us for the first time. How well would our disguises fool its olfactory senses?

"He can tell you're not little girls."

Indeed, it appeared confused, sniffing us from a distance. It did not react with fear, but was not comfortable with the two of us, especially me. How would a Xix smell to a dog?

"He's a Sheltie and smart. I taught him all these tricks with the whistle. Watch."

She blew different rhythms through the instrument. To each, it would perform one of a number of rehearsed motions. Sitting, begging, shaking hands, rolling, pointing. The list went on. I remembered from our years together the love she had for this creature.

"Ambra, how old are you?" I asked.

"I'm seven," she said, flipping several treats to the animal from her backpack.

Matt would die next year. In spring, when the storms came, she would have a dream in which the dog perished. The real death transformed her nightmares into prophecy, convinced her she was cursed with a terrible power. One she did not want or understand.

The visions would increase in amplitude and frequency, beauty and horror. The carefree young child before us would become a withdrawn, troubled preteen. One to be snatched from her home by Dram agents after they murdered her parents.

"I better get back," she said, stuffing all her things into the bag. "Mom's gonna kill me. I'm supposed to be helping." She leaped up and gazed at us. "You're really fairies?"

Kloan gave a thumbs-up sign.

"You'll wait for me to come back tonight, after everyone is asleep?"

"Yes," I said, my heart breaking for the future awaiting her.

"Okay. This is so incredible!"

"Ambra!" A loud call from a female. Cleena Dawn sounded irritated.

"Gotta go. Please be here."

She turned and sprinted back toward the house, the small dog dashing behind. We heard a firm voice chastising her as a door slammed shut.

Kloan lay back in the dirt and put her hands behind her head, staring at the sky. Her green eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

"Take a rest, Waythrel. Now we wait."

Chapter 19

I used to wonder how it comes about that the electron is negative. Negative-positive—these are perfectly symmetric in physics. There is no reason whatever to prefer one to the other. Then why is the electron negative? I thought about this for a long time and at last all I could think was "It won the fight!"

Albert Einstein

Night fell without incident. Kloan and I sat in the cornfield, silent as the chatter of night creatures grew. The light above faded until a scattered stardust littered the sky. We attuned to the sounds emanating from the house. The metal pops of pots and pans from cooking and cleaning. The crackle of hot oil. Doors to the outside opening and closing. Watering systems activated.

Over time these diminished. After a number of hours, silence spilled from the human habitat. Soon after this, Ambra returned to us.

A beam from a flashlight darted back and forth across the corn

rows and approached. The stalks parted, and the child stepped before us with a glint in her eye.

"Look, it's a full moon tonight!" she said, pointing.

The bright radiance of the planet's satellite overtook the stars as it climbed.

"It's a night for fairy magic!" She paused and sat, opening a basket. "I brought dinner, if you're hungry."

The cyborg leaned forward and peered inside. "Bread rolls, fruits, and cheese."

"Yes, is it okay? I don't know what fairies eat." She frowned at her lack of knowledge.

"Watch this," said Kloan.

She waved her hand over the collection. The flaps opened on their own, as if by invisible wires. Ambra gasped and squealed. She put her hands to her mouth as several of the biscuits and plums floated into the air. The food performed acrobatic tricks, weaving through intricate choreographies.

The clone relished every expression of amazement and joy that escaped from her progenitor. Had she not been clinical in her purpose, I could have believed she wanted the child happy. Her eyes held an empathetic engagement. Her smiles were not forced or false. Nothing made sense with this creature.

The *fairy magic* entertainment went on for some time. We walked across the cornfields to a little stream. There, Kloan indulged in astounding telekinetic manipulations of water.

Despite her interest and fascination, as the hours passed, the seven-year-old Ambra tired. Her mind turned from the wizardry. She chatted about her life and thoughts. Her eyes half closed, but she exerted a fierce will to avoid sleep.

After light chatting, I dared to broach the subject. "Why are you afraid of dreaming?"

Silence fell, quieter than a lack of conversation. She held her breath.

"It is okay. You do not have to tell me if you do not want to."

"I don't want to."

I flipped several eyes in her direction and saw she had curled into a small ball.

"Unless you think we can do something," said Kloan.

Please be careful.

"How can you do anything?" She side-eyed us.

"Fairy magic is miraculous. But we need to know more."

Enough with information gathering. If it is too difficult for her, let her be.

Ambra wrapped her arms around her legs in a manner mirroring the cyborg's postures. The symmetry stunned and unnerved me.

"You promise you can help?"

"No. I can't until I know the problem. We *can* do many things."

She weighed a decision in her unusual, seven-year-old mind. "I have dreams. They're awful. Well, some are nice, but some are so bad —I can't tell my parents anymore. They don't like to hear about them." She took a deep breath. "The worst is the Demon Man." She was silent for more than a minute, staring off into the dim cornstalks.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"I don't know!" she moaned, turning her head to her shoulder, tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know who he is. I don't know what he is. I think...it feels like he's not human. He's a monster. He's something else."

Kloan leaned forward and touched her knee. "What does he do in your dreams?"

Ambra sobbed, the words garbled through her gasps for air. "He comes here, always here, with tall things, dark shadows, and they creep through the house and lawn. My mom and dad scream!" She shook. "I can't see them because I'm running out of the house and through the corn. Monsters come after me, and all the smoke of them turns into a black wolf and it's chasing me!"

She threw her arms around the cyborg and cried several minutes. I gazed in dread, familiar with the events her visions foretold. Her kidnap-

ping. Her parents murder. Her life forever changed. In the Anti's push to study all aspects of her life, Kloan no doubt knew the details as well. It had been difficult to hear the adult speak of this period. It was heartrending to watch the small child weeping yet blind to the full horror coming.

She wiped her tears and steadied herself. "It always catches me. It has razor fangs and needles in its mouth, and it grabs my head and cuts and cuts and cuts and eats my brain out."

She's seen so much of it, came the cyborg's thoughts.

Ambra laid back roughly on her back. The constellations blazed, the moon having set in the late hours of the night. She exhaled. "I'm going up there. To the stars. Aren't I?"

"That's right," said Kloan.

"You're not Earth fairies, are you? You're from up there."

"We are," I added.

She closed her eyes. "So, can you help?"

"Yes," said her copy, "with some of it."

I stared in astonishment. *What are you promising her?*

Her eyes snapped open. "How?"

"In two ways. Tonight is the first way. I'll make you sleep without the dreams. I will use our magic to give you peace the remainder of the night, and the Demon Man won't come."

The relief in Ambra's eyes struck me as a blow.

"When you wake tomorrow, we'll talk of one other thing we can do. But not until you rest."

She grasped both our hands and pressed them to her heart. "You're the best friends ever."

Kloan eased her backward. "Lie down now."

She complied. The Anti's assassin closed her eyes and held her palms together like a prayer. For some time, nothing happened, and we stared at her in puzzlement.

Darting glows. First one or two at a time. More followed in streams. Rivers of radiance. Aggregating in a dizzying, blurring ball of dashing light.

"Fireflies!" said Ambra. "So many. They're usually sleeping now."

"I woke them." The orb of dancing stars floated above us. "It's a lamp. For the night."

The hundreds of insects danced in a small sphere the size of a child's balloon. Ambra passed her hand through it. The air at the edges shimmied and refracted the firefly glow as if through rippling water.

"Amazing," she said.

"Sleep now," said the cyborg. "Trust me."

To my surprise, she did. She was near to collapse from exhaustion, anyway. The soothing words, the hope for a peaceful night pulled her down like a drug to the ground.

But it was more than that. My Reader senses detected distortions in spacetime. I surmised Kloan was already manipulating Ambra's mind.

Are you really doing this? Can you?

Yes. Let me concentrate. Her sentience is many-layered.

So I waited. Five minutes later, the sleeping child's breaths were heavy.

Kloan leaned back, fatigued. "The universe runs wild through this one," she said.

"Are you surprised?" I asked.

"No, but I'm tired."

Practical problems assaulted me. "We will need to carry her back into the house, somehow avoid disturbing the family or the pet."

"No, leave her to rest. She needs it, and I don't want my efforts ruined with too much disturbance."

"Her parents..."

She spoke through a yawn. "They'll come looking for her and find their strange daughter napping under the stars. I doubt it's the weirdest thing they've dealt with."

"We can keep vigil, wake her when they begin to search and hide ourselves."

"Yes, but I'm not a Xix. I'll sleep, too. You have the watch. It's a few hours until dawn anyway."

Kloan did not wait for my response. She dropped to her side and rested her head on her arm, shutting her eyes. Despite her fatigue, I could not let her disappear into slumber.

"Why did you do this?"

Her drowsy voice was a thread above a whisper. "Do what?"

"Such kindness. Insight and empathy. One moment you are cold, murderous. Another you see toward the heart of another better than I. Act with love on the knowledge. *What are you?*"

She yawned again. "God, Waythrel, do we have to do this now?" She turned on her back, facing the stars. "It won't make sense. You will never completely understand me. I'll never comprehend either of you, but I must probe all those elements of discord."

"Why?"

"To become what she is not. In all possible ways." She rolled over to the other side, away from me. "An inverse. A true, sentient transposition. That's my destiny. Look, don't think about it tonight."

"You're right, I am confused. Opposite in consciousness?"

Her exasperated thoughts sounded in my mind. *You Xix never let go!*

"You can't grasp it yet. You've not even come to terms with basic physics—that the Anti *exist*. If one of the Anti were in front of you now and didn't blow everything up, what would it look like?"

"Like any other living being, with its own parameters, morphology."

"Bingo. Anti-water looks like water. Anti-stars look like stars. Antiparticles likewise, with a special inverse. So, particles and fields are the essence of sentience. Don't you see, Waythrel? There have to be anti-thoughts, anti-minds, anti-ideas that are the same yet *different*."

"Like hate and love?"

"No!" She rolled over and glared at me. "You're better than that. Not so simplistic and one-dimensional. Those are mere vectors. If

you flip a 3D object in two dimensions, it's all wrong. If you invert consciousness with such a low dimensionality, smash! It's not an inverse; it's a mess!"

"You're right," I said. "Those are concepts unconsidered by any science I have encountered in the galaxy."

She flipped away from me again. "I must learn these ways. Become them in the context of Ambra Dawn. Her opposite."

The last words struck me. I now had a small inkling of what this might mean, but a little knowledge is dangerous. A vast landscape of meaning peeked over a horizon I had not considered. The purpose eluded me.

"Why?"

"Waythrel!" she growled. "It's the whole point of all this. Now shut up. Let Kloan sleep."

I sat still, and within seconds, the clone was sleeping alongside her progenitor. I glanced back and forth between the two children, Kloan and Ambra, Ambra and Kloan. One a naive, yet jading, Earth girl. The other a jaded, yet divinely naive, abomination of tubes and wires and indoctrination.

Inverses?

My eyes drank the star-filled heavens. Something profound, something important, something frightening was escaping my grasp. Despite my efforts, I could not bring it into focus. On the horizon of my awareness the monstrous and beautiful lurked. For now, I knew it only as distant rumor.

It rumbled like a thundercloud beyond my comprehension.

Chapter 20

Go to the edge of the cliff and jump off. Build your wings on the way down.

Ray Bradbury

"Ambra!"

The calls floated above the early morning mist and cricket sounds. I shook the pair, and they both woke, startled.

The mother's voice was particularly close. "Where are you?"

"Oh *no!*" hissed Ambra, throwing her things into her pack and stumbling upward. "I have to go! Mom's going to *kill* me!"

She darted to the wall of stalks and spun, staring at her disguised copy. "It worked. Last night. Your promise. What about the other one?"

Kloan croaked through a smile. "Meet us down by the stream. Follow the fireflies."

She bobbed her head and dashed off. The morning sounds transitioned into angry and joyous shouts from her parents.

"We should not be so close," I offered.

"For sure."

She stood and stretched, and we moved away from the house. Not being of Earth, all my instincts for navigation struggled. The clone used her own special powers. I did not doubt she could explore the world at all levels of detail. The cyborg led, and again I followed.

She brought us to a small stream, and we sat under a tree as she dozed again for some time. I did not know how much the Anti had altered the basic human brain physiology. Whatever machinery they had added could not remove the need for sleep.

"She'll come again in the night," she muttered while resting against the broad trunk. "Her parents won't let her leave the house today because of last evening. Wake me at sunset."

Kloan slept straight through the entire day. She stirred for short moments. To turn to one side or the other. Mumble through her dreams.

"It's going to be a hard night, Waythrel," she said during one such waking, my leaky thoughts caught in her net. "I need to charge up." She gave no other explanation.

While she dozed, I entered a Xixian trance, conserving resources in quiet contemplation. Xix do not sleep, not in the sense Earth mammals do. We purge the metabolic waste products of our brain clusters and balance their neural networks from the day's experiences. However, our recovery states are more efficient than your own. They are also under conscious control. We do not dream.

The day passed in this way. The sun set, and I woke her. She removed some of Ambra's bread from her robes. "It's too bad I can't eat this."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Upsets my stomach. I'd offer you some," she said, "but I know you can't process human food. Are you hungry, Waythrel? Metabolism hunky-dory?"

"Yes, for a few more days. Afterward, it will become a problem."

"We'll be gone after tonight, and everything will reset."

"Do you mean—"

"She's coming!" she cried and sprang to her feet.

In the direction she stared, a pale glow grew. A will-o'-the-wisp bobbed through the cornrows accompanied by a mashing of footsteps. Through the stalks burst another sphere of firefly light and Ambra Dawn.

"I made it!" she said, amazed with herself. "They're asleep, but I put a ball and stuffed clothes in my bed in case they check."

Kloan gave a thumbs-up. "Perfect."

"I love the fireflies." Ambra's smile faded. "How can you help me?"

"Let's talk about the Demon Man."

She released a long breath and held her hands together near her stomach. "Okay."

"Do you know why you see him in your nightmares? Because your dreams predict the *future*."

Wait! She was so reckless!

"No—" said Ambra, shaking her head and stepping back.

"You have enormous powers, and they're waking up. You'll see many things. He's one of them."

"No, it's not true." Two more steps back. Her eyes were wide.

Kloan, stop! This is too sudden. She needs years to come to terms with this.

"Because it's true—the Demon Man isn't a dream. He is real. He's coming to get you. He'll come here. He will kill your parents."

Ambra moaned.

"He'll take you to a place where they'll cut open your head and slice up your brain."

"*No!*" She screamed and ran to the cornfield.

"Stop!" said Kloan.

Ambra crashed into an invisible wall of jelly. It absorbed her momentum and prevented her passage, deflecting her fists as she pounded on the structure.

"*No!*"

"You've *seen* all this, Ambra!" Kloan cried, raising her voice over the small child's mantra of denial. "You don't want to face it."

This was torture. The cyborg had deceived me again and had turned helping Ambra into another occasion to harm her. I didn't know what twisted psychological experiment she was conducting. Why it was important to the universe. I did not care if the god-Ambra was on board with this suffering. *I was not.* I had to intervene.

"No point, Waythrel," she said.

I could not move or speak. Ambra had stopped her futile pounding on the barrier. She crumbled into a ball, mucus covering her upper lip, tears dripping from the sides of her face.

Kloan walked to her and crouched. "You can't hide from it forever. But we *can* save you from it."

What are you doing?

"How?"

She took Ambra's hands. "We'll go to the warehouse."

Ambra shuddered and turned away.

"Visit the labs and find the Demon Man. Kill him. Then burn everything to the ground."

Ambra gawked. She focused on me to gain verification of this incredible proclamation. "Kill him?"

"Kill all of them, destroy the entire place, until nothing remains."

Ambra pushed against the bizarre force field, studying it, not seeking escape. "You can do this?"

More than anyone, I knew it was within the powers of this clone.

"Yes, if you want it. If you can face your fear and stop hiding from what you know is true, then come with us to the labs. I promise you, by the sunrise, there will be nothing left but smoke and dust. Not even bones."

I projected my thoughts, trying to get a word in this conversation.

You are asking a young child to approve a slaughter. A massacre and destruction. It should not be her burden.

The cosmos has not asked what burdens she deserves. It has placed them on her. Open your mind, Waythrel.

Ambra glared at the stars. "It's all true, isn't it? I don't want the truth." She whipped toward Kloan and sandwiched the clone's head in both hands. "I'll come. You'll take me there?"

Kloan didn't flinch. "Yes."

"And you'll burn it to the ground?"

They locked eyes. My restraints vanished. I stepped forward, but didn't know what to say or do.

"Let's go," said Ambra, and she rose. "Which way?"

Chapter 21

Insanity is relative. It depends on who has whom locked in what cage.

Ray Bradbury

"We'll fly like Peter Pan," said Kloan, and with those words, we took to the skies.

The three of us rose over the cornfields in the light of a gibbous moon. Ambra squealed as we soared. The air chilled, plots of land and houses rushing below at increasing speeds until they became a blur. I could see the narrative building within the young girl, of fairies and magic, of flying to face a dark nemesis.

How do you know where to go? I asked Kloan.

It isn't far, her thoughts replied. *I've been searching the past and the minds involved. It wasn't difficult.*

Will you do this thing?

What do you think, Waythrel?

Twinkling towns passed us on either side. Highways like glowing vasculature radiated across the plains. I could not judge our velocity. We sped fast enough that the cyborg must have blocked the airflow.

Although the ground raced by, it was the mildest of cool breezes stirring us. Ambra was captivated. She said nothing, staring downward or to the clouds with watering eyes and a grin.

I also lost myself in the wondrous journey. It was reminiscent of the travels with the Daughter in a relative future that would bring me back to this past. Memories of the mission to shut the Time Tree. The strange spacetime bubble cocooning a mixed team traversing alien landscapes. The images of my memory were overlaid with the present flight. Visions of another life and an altered universe.

We slowed over a dark and undeveloped expanse. Ahead, a pool of light broke the monotony of the emptiness. To this isolated patch we descended. Artificial lamps revealed an extended warehouse. Enormous power generators studded one end of the complex. Long and short-range radar antennae rose like trees around it. We had reached a node of the Dram hegemony on Old Earth.

Our feet touched the dusty ground in front of a main entrance to the building. Razor wire and electrified fences surrounded us. Hundreds of cameras and motion detectors monitored the area. Ambra would not be able to avoid detection without our *dark suits*. While I studied the compound, I mulled the violation I felt from this field imposed over my body. Yet here and now, I wished all three of us had them. I feared it was already too late.

We're not going for subtlety, my dear Xix.

The wonder of the flight had vanished.

Ambra shook, her face slack as she spoke. "This is it. It's bigger in the dreams."

Engines rumbled and tires squealed. Vehicles approached from every side. Floodlights blasted our position, and a loud, amplified voice barked commands.

"Don't move! Identify yourselves or face hostile action!"

Ambra whimpered, her body pressing against ours. "Don't let them take me."

The cyborg stepped forward, waving to the armored hulks. "Hi! I'm Kloan! This is Waythrel of Xix on my left and Ambra Dawn on

my right. One's from an alien world at war with your masters. The other is the future failed messiah of this galaxy. And we're prepared for hostile action!"

Vehicles imploded like crushed soda cans to the horrific harmony of mashed bodies and screams. The compacted chunks were flung from us and shook the ground as they bounced across the compound.

She clapped her hands, and a blinding glare flashed from the other end of the warehouse. A loud explosion drummed our ears as the generators detonated into the sky. Brilliant flares impacted the installation like a meteor shower.

The lights of the facility extinguished. Emergency batteries jolted backup lamps. Kloan walked toward the entrance bathed in a flickering radiance.

"Oh my God," said Ambra.

Her face held the horror of what was happening, and I pitied her for it. A furious hope replaced the shock, a steely resolve driving her forward. She ached to slay this dragon.

Mounted weaponry dropped from the ceiling in front of the door and released a barrage of metal. High-caliber projectiles hurled from machine-guns ricocheted away from an invisible umbrella. The weapons found themselves ripped from their anchors and slung to the side.

The doors exploded inward to terrified screams. Dust billowed through the hallway from shattered cement. Figures in white lab coats dashed for shelter in the failing lights as soldiers rushed our trio. Our clone assassin flung their bodies against the walls. Some dropped to the ground as if they had suffered a sudden stroke.

We crossed medical research facilities. Kloan dispatched any resistance but spared those avoiding us. We passed many rooms with hospital charts posted outside. Children diffused from their chambers. Some ran to the exits. A host followed us, drawn onward by the cataclysmic events, unable to turn away.

"Down this hall," whispered Ambra. "At the end."

The crowd huddled in back of us. Some fled at this point, too afraid to approach whatever waited our arrival. The lights along the ceiling had shorted out. Popping sparks rained over our movements, strobing the pack we led toward a last door.

"Ambra?" Kloan stepped aside and motioned for her to open the door.

Was this a final trick? Whoever cowered behind the door, he had secured himself. Would Ambra catch the full frontal assault through this ruse of Kloan's?

Stop, Waythrel. She's facing her fear. And yes, I am observing the process. I don't do charity work.

Ambra approached the door and turned the knob, pushing it in with a determined thrust.

Inside was the Demon Man.

Except as most nightmares in the light of day, he was less monster and more man. A man of substantial cruelty, no doubt—power hungry, lost in mastering the game extraterrestrials had laid out for humanity. A balding, short, and now frightened wreck.

Kloan grabbed Ambra's hand, and they entered together. I followed while a gaggle of children peered from behind the doorframe.

Inside was an office, simple, bare but for a desk and a computer. He did not care much for decorations or personalizing. He did have one remaining response in the form of two towering Dram soldiers on his right and left. The insects aimed weapons in our direction.

"Whoever you are, you will die for this," he said with anger and a pure sense of certainty.

They fired on us. Another fireworks display erupted. The beams rebounded like a prismatic spray. The rays shattered into a thousand colorful needles setting fire to wood and paper. They ignited the ceiling tiles and burned blisters into the skin of the man behind the desk. He yelped in pain. The soldiers advanced, flashing bladed devices.

"Don't bother," said Kloan.

The creatures screamed as their exoskeletons ripped from their flesh. Brown fluids spilled from their forms as they fell to the ground, clawing at the carpet. She let them thrash and shoved them against the walls with invisible hands.

"My God, what are you?" The Demon Man trembled, cradling a blistered arm across his chest.

"You really should choose your victims with more forethought," Kloan mocked him. "Poor girl here. She could see into the future. Predict you would do terrible things to her because she's a Reader in your jurisdiction. So, because of a recursive time loop that won't release us—created by none other than her transcendental evolution—we traveled back into the past and decided to help her destroy this place. That's the now. Which means your time's up."

He scowled. "You speak nonsense."

"I usually do. Now...die."

Without a drop of spilled blood or a cry, the man fell to the ground, unmoving.

I rushed and examined him for a heartbeat. "He's dead," I said.

Ambra wept. Tears, smiles, and horror all mingled together. She dropped to her knees and stared at the man. She was less than seven, a tiny child reduced to the rawest of emotions.

"Is he really?" she asked me. "I can't believe it."

"Yes," I said. "No pulse. Check for yourself."

She shook her head, satisfied. Ambra stood and hugged her clone.

"Not done yet!" said Kloan, a strange light in her eyes.

We swept back out of the complex, evacuating all the children. The scientists and techs who refused our summons were on their own. Their time left short. As we exited, the ground rumbled, and a searing flame lit the warehouse from behind.

"It sounds like a transport," I said.

"They have a landing pad for carting off the navslav recruits. Looks like we were blessed with a small Dram unit. They must have chickened out from what they saw."

A dark spacecraft offset by bright exhaust climbed into the night sky.

The cyborg pursed her lips. "Yeah. It's perfect."

The ship careened right and pitched. The engines roared, inducing a violent turn, and it plunged toward the earth.

"Kloan, it's going to crash!" I cried out.

The impact thundered. The craft vaporized the laboratory building. The metal melted, running like water. A mushroom cloud belched into the air.

At our distance, we should all have perished. While the landscape nearby smoked, the dust under our feet remained undisturbed. We did not feel heat from the raging fires.

The other children watched, astonished. Some of the older ones jumped for joy, many sitting on the ground, crying and disoriented. I spent the better part of an hour trying to comfort them as the pair stared into the flames.

"You did it," whispered Ambra as I returned. "You kept your promise. Not even their bones."

The flickering glare from the inferno danced across Kloan's features. Her mouth was set in a determined line. "Not even their bones."

She placed a hand on Ambra's shoulder.

"Now, you'll never go there, and the evil men won't hurt you."

Chapter 22

I said to the almond tree: "Speak to me of God," and the almond tree blossomed.

Nikos Kazantzakis

Green eyes in the darkness.

A night sky churned with stars. The patterns enigmatic. A soft breeze. Sounds of alien creatures.

Nausea from memories. Ripped and thrown from dream to nightmare. Timeline to worldline. Reality to the unreal. My eyestalks darted. They despaired of appraising the planet surface. The heavens. The figure of the girl rocking beside me.

Kloan sat with her knees tucked to her chin, hiding her head. Haunting lime eyes peeked over her kneecaps. Arms wrapped around her legs. She still hummed.

"Again?" I asked.

The child continued to rock and hum, ignoring my question. Desperation seized me. The humming stopped.

"Or never," she answered.

"Never?" My eyes swiveled. "You destroyed the Dram laboratories, where they took Ambra and altered her. Those labs made her what she is, what she became. However misguided their reasons, they changed the fate of the galaxy."

"No. Of a universe."

"You demolished it. What does this mean? What future, what reality, did this create? Where is the Daughter? What has happened to her?"

"She's everywhere. Everything's happened to her. And nothing."

The intubated, tattooed head cocked to one side, glowing eyes never leaving my form. Tendrils of her thought danced around my awareness.

"You keep probing my mind."

Her head remained at a forty-five-degree angle, peering from behind her right knee.

"Your thoughts leak over everything. You Xix are leaky-brains."

The child stood, catching me off guard. She approached, long, ragged clumps of crimson curls careening over her face.

"More experiments, Waythrel. I was skeptical, but the Anti always believed there were unstable nodes in time, and that this is one of them. So sure that, with the Earth facility destroyed, Ambra Dawn would not *become*. I kept telling the idiots, it's not *then* that you have to worry about her, but at the *beginning*."

The words slapped my consciousness. *From a dream.*

"Kloan, where are we?"

"Don't you know?"

I stood, examining the rugged landscape. A flat plain below. Lights of a city washing out the canopy of stars.

"We are back where we began. When you took me after Dram."

"When did we *begin*, Waythrel?"

I stared at the emerald orbs, disoriented. Memories treaded water in a blurred fog. I could no longer conclude what was real and what was in my mind.

"I am confused. What is happening? You seem to understand."

"That's *why* you're here. *Data.* The data to open the gate." She turned her back on me, walking down a steep slope. "Let's get started."

"With what? Where are you going?"

Kloan continued. Her words drowned in the wind and creature sounds.

"To where it all began for me. To watch the beginning flow around us and mature and twist through time and space to come back to be us. Then we'll be ready for the next step."

Starlight burned shadows into the sandy stones. The child vanished, swallowed in the darkness of the hill. I froze, trying to understand the madness of my own thoughts.

What was happening to me? What had happened, and what had not? Were these real experiences, *time loops*? If so, did it mean they actually occurred? If not, how could I remember them? If they *had* transpired, how could Ambra have *become* and therefore how could I have come here in the first place? Everything was a paradox!

Waythrel, come on!

Her tones trumpeted in my mind. My eyestalks curled on themselves. I shrank from the desolate space surrounding me.

What else was there to do?

Chapter 23

The opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.

Niels Bohr

I chased the child. The dusty ground slipped under my feet. I slid and tripped, my four arms grasping the stones and alien vegetation. Why couldn't I get a decent grip?

It's a field around you, remember? Her thoughts danced through my mind. *It's skintight, coating your surfaces, insulating you from everything.*

Memories leapt through my mind. The strange sensation, her words, walking up the slope to a shining disk—*the gate*.

Rounding a mammoth rock, I stumbled upon her. Ragged rocks littered the terrain, the detritus of collapse from the unstable cliffs.

"The disguises. Cloaking. I recall—why do we have them?"

She peered below. A technological complex spread over dry lands. Transports blasted into orbit from the outskirts. Organized groups marched throughout the installation.

"For our protection."

"From what?"

Kloan pointed to the city. "That's where we start. What was this night? It must be a visitation, I'm sure of it. We'll go meet me there, and then you'll see what happens."

She stepped toward the compound, and I grabbed her, desperate for answers.

"Another clone facility?"

"Yes."

Déjà vu sickened me. "There is an attack. We cannot walk right into that place."

"There's no danger."

"They will kill any Xix they see."

"They won't see us. We're invisible, remember?"

I remembered...*something*. "*You* broke through Ambra's field. So can they."

Kloan shook her head. "Hers was simple. Primitive."

"Yours now is none of those things?"

"I told you, they're not *mine*. Now, come on."

The child pulled me forward. Helpless, my mind whirled. Events were suspect—now, before, those to come. I distrusted my own thoughts. Would I understand any of this madness?

We covered the distance between the broken hills and the installation. The flat landscape made my efforts far less exhausting. Rather than concentrate on each step, I observed the nearing fortification. It was unlike any city or technological society I had ever seen.

The minds shaping this world were more divergent than anything I had studied in all my travels. While strange, I had a sense it was not unknown to me. Humans populated the space. I saw no other species, no differing life-forms, but two classes: those who resembled Ambra Dawn and those who did not.

"The Anti run things with robots and trained people," Kloan added.

Sampling my *leaky* thoughts again.

"To avoid annihilation?"

"No, they aren't concerned about it here. It's more efficient. Once they optimized the program, it ran with drones and lackeys."

Approaching the complex, we observed armed, robotic sentinels floating by the gate. Unseen by their sensors, our cloaking tech remained impenetrable. Within, the activity of mechanized units revealed a discernible order.

"Machines do all the work," I said.

She lectured with little concern for discovery. "Clones require a societal framework. Interpersonal connections. Development hinges on social interaction. Without it, the brain's potential degrades. The essence of human neurophysiology. So the Anti imported them. It's a clone growth matrix."

"Like in the desert fields," I said, remembering the groups of cyborgs and humans.

"A beginning before the planet was destroyed."

"Dram is gone?" My mind stuttered.

"Blew themselves to bits in a stupid civil war. It didn't matter. They were an outpost."

"This is another one?"

"Maybe the last. They had to build them farther away. Find stronger clones for concealment. They're hunted across the cosmos by the devil ball."

"The what?"

Kloan grinned. "Your little Orbies. We had other names for them. Other thoughts. Come, you will see. You'll *learn*."

We traversed the city, an amalgam of foreign and familiar. We observed young Ambra Dawns and their cloned and human escorts. She gestured towards buildings and objects that held particular significance.

"Here are the wombs. Our birthplaces. Moms!" She winked. "Long ago, on Dram, the scientists realized gestation is crucial for neural development. In vitro attempts proved disastrous." A wide grin. "The notion of birth, rather than mere growth, is reassuring, is it not?"

Sarcasm from a cyborg. Unnerving. Nevertheless, I had begun to like this unsettling creature.

"What we saw on Dram was not reassuring, Kloan."

"The teachers are going to hate you," she said in a strange tone. "But we don't have time for lessons. We have to find the enclosure."

"What is that?"

"You remember, Waythrel," she said.

She grabbed my hand and yanked, sprinting across the compound. We reached a bizarre building unlike any of the others. External walls of deep black—obsidian—reflected little light. Churning electromagnetic fields pulsed around the structure.

"Home," she repeated. "Or quarantine. Take your pick."

Chapter 24

We cannot predict the new forces, powers, and discoveries that will be disclosed to us when we reach the other planets and set up new laboratories in space. They are as much beyond our vision today as fire or electricity would be beyond the imagination of a fish.

Arthur C. Clarke

"Yes, I remember." I stared at the prison they had engineered for the child. "To keep you and your powers under control."

"It was useful in the beginning, when I was very little. Come, I'll get us through the fields."

Kloan yanked, and the universe lurched. My vision fractured. Events surged and faltered, overwhelming my Reader senses. Unable to steady my flailing eyestalks, I lost focus. A tumult of images invaded my awareness. Grasping the wall beside me, I steadied myself and refocused.

A spartan room greeted us. A bed, table, toilet, and sink. No products for leisure. No children's toys. No books or electronic

information sources. A single diode in the ceiling dispelled the night, washing the chamber in a soft tan.

Inside was a little girl. Perhaps aged five years, she sat at the edge of a mattress. Her eyes stared forward in a trance. It was a younger version of Kloan. More childlike, with less cranial modification. A decrease in the subcutaneous patterning gave this earlier stage clearer skin.

My eyes froze on the impossible thing floating above the ground. A vortex of milky light swirled in the center of the room. Spinning shapes boiled, *faces*, phantoms beneath the waves of a pearl sea. The forms were indistinct, too insubstantial and transient for me to identify.

One shape I could not help but recognize. The vapors coalesced around a central extrusion, a human face. The skull lay open, the brain filleted behind it and fading into the fog. Tubes and wires, dwarfing the insertions into Kloan, ravaged the head. Machine parts obscured the eyes. The mouth was free.

"Ambra."

The monstrosity of our desperate gamble to save the galaxy confronted me. My gaze shifted between the apparition and Kloan's distinct physical manifestations. The weight of the truth crushed me. My lover Synphel had warned us. We had triumphed by becoming our enemy.

The younger cyborg rose and walked to the seething impossibility.

"I'm a problem for the teachers. They're afraid of me."

"They will decide that you represent too much of a danger. The Anti will destroy you."

"They will fail," said the child.

"If it comes to conflict, yes. There are better paths. Continue your training. Follow what we have been teaching you. The time to leave will come soon."

"Today, they threatened me because I'm disturbing the planet's orbit."

"They do not understand your power source," said Ambra. "They cannot see the connections we have forged between you and the matrix of the continuum. But they begin to appreciate that you have transcended their program and dominion."

The room *shifted*. Vertigo gripped me. My eyestalks floundered. A whirlwind of visuals stormed through my consciousness.

"Waythrel, hold on to me."

Kloan grabbed my arm. The dizziness passed. My vision came under my conscious control.

Morning's light streamed through a transparent region of the quarantine field. Sounds of explosions and shouts echoed outside. The room was in disarray. Clothes strewn about, food and utensils as well. My olfactory strips detected a growing acrid smell. *Smoke.*

"The gate is prepared," said Ambra.

An older version of Kloan stood in front of the vortex. She was now, in all appearances, identical to the form beside me. Sweat beaded across her forehead. Her muscles tensed.

"I'm ready," she said.

"You must leave now. They will return with greater numbers of clones and more devastating weapons. They will force you to destroy them if you engage."

"I don't want to kill them. Lead me to the portal."

The tromp of rushing feet thundered from outside. A heavy rumbling accompanied them.

Ambra's ghostly form pivoted toward the door of the quarantine cell. "Through the door."

The black field that sealed the chamber gave way to a second churning whirlpool. It opened to span the width of the frame. Through it poured bright daylight. The city beyond her isolation unit vanished, replaced by a rocky landscape.

The countryside within the vortex extended to the limits of my vision. At the end of the tunnel was a worn path on a steep slope. The vegetation was eroded, the rocks smoother, the coloration of the terrain distinct. The walkway rose up the hillside and ceased at a

broad disk. Sunlight gleamed off the surface. Blinding reflections bounced into the room and cast shadows on the floor.

Kloan pulled my arm, showing me that her temporal copy had entered the passage.

"The gate," she said.

I stumbled forward, blinded by the daggers of light glinting into the room. Outside, shouts added to the cacophony, and the walls began to smolder and glow a bright orange.

"Good luck, my dearest friend," said the apparition of Ambra Dawn as I stepped within the vortex.

My eyestalks bent backward to see the disembodied head turned toward me. Its motion sent ripples across the sea of blurred faces. Tears dripped from her eyes, coating the wires and tubes in her once-green irises. A bittersweet smile lined her face.

"I love you, Waythrel. Remember, whatever happens."

The room exploded.

Chapter 25

At first sight, nothing appears more obvious than that everything has a beginning and an end, and that everything can be subdivided into smaller parts. Nevertheless, for entirely speculative reasons the philosophers of Antiquity, especially the Stoics, concluded this concept to be quite unnecessary. The prodigious development of physics has now reached the same conclusion as those philosophers.

Svante Arrhenius

Fire and debris surged towards me, veiling the divine entity. The portal's closure spared me from annihilation.

High in the rugged terrain, profound silence replaced the turmoil. The faint rustling of pebbles and shrubs in sporadic winds broke the quiet. A trace of smoke remained, hinting at the devastation below.

Haunted by Ambra's parting words, I retreated from the vanished doorway. Kloan beckoned from the glowing gateway.

"Where is the clone?"

The child smiled. "She's right here."

For a moment I paused, confused, my mind still stunned from the violence.

"This is where you left. When you went to kidnap me."

"Mmm-hmm. I'm gone already through the gate, so I could come back with you. It's an elegant loop."

"It is madness. What is Ambra doing?"

Her shoulders slumped. "You aren't the only one tested, Waythrel. Each time's different. When we finally understand, we'll see the way." She turned toward the disk. "We come to the next step of our journey, again. Are you ready?"

Of course, I was not. But this was not the first time I had been asked this question in this precise location.

"We have been here before, just like this."

"Not *just* like, but have been and will be. But never *just* like. We're nested in temporal recursions that can't be unknotted or normalized."

"This strange concept is clarifying. We have not found a way out yet. Is this what you are calling hell?"

"One of them."

My eyestalks focused on Kloan. "There was more. There was a hope. To go *back*. To find Synphel."

"Yes," she said. "There was."

"Much more is happening, but I am not appreciating."

"You don't appreciate how much you do not appreciate."

I stared at the small bundle of aphorisms, the wind stirring her sparse hair and robes. "You are coming with me?"

"What other point is there?"

I turned my attention to the gate, fear and fatigue weighing on me. It was a cross-sectional slice of an Orb. I was sure of it now. The surface churned with myriad colors, a viscous honey. It felt like an acquaintance, long known and burdensome. Stars swam inside with no end. It pulled me as I gazed. Beautiful. Dreadful. An ever-hungry maw to devour me for eternity. I grasped the child's hand.

Kloan laughed. “Seems we’ll always be dancing together, Xix.”

My eyestalks wrapped around each other, the covering sheaths expanding, blocking out all light.

We walked into the gel.

Part IV

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee
the coming wrath? Your ways lead to the grave!
This faith in rationed rationality
is sweet opiate to which you are enslaved!

The opiate, a poison to our land,
to endless wars and deaths has given birth.
Our planet's blood we see stained on your hands!
In your unthinking path we find no worth.

Enlightenment we offer—cleanse your sins!
The Pierian spring will wash you clean.
Drink deep! or taste not truth we hold within!
Perhaps, indeed, our Way is for the keen.

For faith misplaced we hold a simple cure:
Baptized in reason, you will then be pure.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 26

If the Lord Almighty had consulted me before embarking upon his creation, I should have recommended something simpler.

Alfonso X of Castile

We dangled in a kaleidoscope.

The gate drank our forms and spit us into a weightless, intangible nothingness. I spun devoid of tactile, auditory, or olfactory sensation. A swirling infinity of chromatic patterns oscillated to the edges of what a Xix could perceive. My body reflected the fountain of color. The gel matrix melded like lubricating oil with the colored nothing penetrating reality.

Kloan floated beside me, her eyes intense, expectant, and searching this strange space. I tried to speak, but no sounds escaped the translator. Was there no atmosphere to propagate the vocalizations?

I reached out mentally. *Where are we?*

Limbo, whispered her thoughts in my mind.

Please. Clear answers for a change. Can we survive here? There is no air!

We're suspended. In stasis, Waythrel. No need to breathe. No needs*. We aren't anything and yet are not nothing. We are between.*

Has the gate failed?

No, I don't think so. It sent us someplace specific. We're trapped in an Orb.

Inside? I had traversed the Time Sphere several times. My kidnapping by the creature floating beside me the most recent. In none of those traversals had the portal presented such an appearance.

Because you were locked in defined world lines. This is different. This limbo is without direction in space or in time.

That does not make sense.

Do the Orbs make sense to you, Waythrel? Do you understand them?

Of course, I did not. No being, no species in our galaxy understood the Orbs. Or, rather, the one, true Sphere. I did not comprehend the connection between Ambra's godlike Group Mind and the objects, either.

That again? Why won't you accept the obvious?

Which is?

Occam's razor: among competing hypotheses, we select the one with the fewest assumptions.

It is not possible.

What you think is likely isn't part of Occam's razor. Explanations may come later, or be beyond you. What explains all the data in the simplest way?

The Orb is Ambra.

Finally.

Everything pointed toward this conclusion, but I could not grasp it. No, I could not accept it. The Orbs were ancient, older than the oldest life in our galaxy. How could the mad plan we set in motion billions of years afterward have anything to do with that?

Silly Xix. How could the Daughter save Earth from a Dram aster-

oid? How could she explore the before and implant ideas into long-dead people?

Kloan, it is one thing to imagine traveling a short distance in time. Even manipulating history. Whatever the recursive nightmares and infinities in prediction it might involve. This is different. How could we of the far future engender an entity existing near the beginning of the universe? One guiding the development of intelligent life? I am limited to how much suspension of causality I can maintain.

You have to get off the one-dimensional train, Waythrel. Reality is a sticky mud splashing in too many directions to count. Past, what's to come, the now, all poking and prodding each other and shaping a clay that's not in *time but* of *time—Oh, look!*

Her strong thoughts slapped my mind, and I reoriented my attention. The endless curtains of light and color split. A spherical disruption refracting the dancing chromatics grew in size as it approached. In the bubble were two humanoid figures. One lay supine, a female, her black dress and long red hair immediately identifying her. The other was a larger male in recognizable battle armor, resting on his side.

Nitin and Ambra. What are they doing here?

The sphere neared, and we passed unhindered through its surface. Inside was air, regulated temperature, a structure on which I could stand. I knew where we were. It was the spacetime enclosure the Daughter had created for our mission. I tried to ignore the gel goo reasserting its presence.

"We can talk now," said Kloan, and she approached the pair. "Still limbo, you know."

The colors continued to wash over us. "What happened to them?"

She touched them, recoiling from her progenitor. "Something *very* strange with her. Powerful. I can't penetrate. Her body and mind are diverged. Not here or there. Not now or before or later. I can't reach her. Yet she lives."

"Nitin?"

She crouched beside his head. "Sleeping. A deep sleep induced by others. We could wake him. He has interesting dreams."

I walked alongside the cyborg and stared down at the two forms. Neither appeared injured. Both matched my memories from our final mission.

"This is *after*," said Kloan, parsing my thoughts again. "His nightmares recall your disappearance. They reveal other amazing things."

"What happened to them?"

"The Orb," she said. "I know this history—don't look so surprised. My birth occurred eons after."

I pushed such madness to the side. "What *happened*?"

"After I stole you, she followed, but the thing stopped her. It showed her a vision of her future integration into the proto-Sphere. Afterward, they fell into the portal and appeared in the Sahara. She wasn't breathing, and her boyfriend resuscitated her. The memories playing over in his brain right now put them between Dram and New Earth. This must be their traversal."

"Why are we here, of all places?"

Kloan didn't hide her disappointment. "Data, of course. Testing hypotheses." She touched the soldier's forehead. "Nitin, wake up!"

Chapter 27

The more likely evolutionary outcomes are the ones that absorbed and dissipated more energy from the environment's external drives. Atoms surrounded by a bath at some temperature, like the atmosphere or the ocean, tend to arrange to resonate better with sources of work in their environments. Start with a random clump of atoms, and if you shine light on it for long enough, it should not be so surprising that you get a plant.

Jeremy England

The soldier startled. His eyes flipped open and fought to focus. They swam in the effervescent colors. He rolled to his back with a groan, massaging his temples. His glance fell first on me.

"Waythrel. You were gone."

"I still am, Captain."

He squinted at the colored landscape, ignoring my words. "Where are we?"

He stumbled to his feet, his expression furious, his weapons activating. He aimed his ion slingers toward Kloan.

"You!" he shouted. "You did all this! You took the Xix! You led Ambra to the Orb!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I told you I would. Don't you remember?"

He furrowed his brows. "In the dream. You spoke nonsense!"

"To you. You lack insight."

"Waythrel stand back," he said.

"It is no use," I said. "You cannot hurt her."

"I can't let this clone live after what we found on Dram."

Explanation was hopeless. What was I to say? The battle with the Anti spanned cosmic time? The Daughter launched this False Dawn on a journey with me? My eyes darted to the ground and the female form. What could I tell him of what was to become of his lover?

Kloan took on the project. "The vision you saw is her future, Nitin. It's coming."

"What?" His eyes went wide, a wild light burning. "Ambra!" He ran to her side.

"She's fine."

"There's no pulse! No breath!" he shouted.

"She's suspended. By the Orb. See, still warm. You can't undo this suspension while we're in here," she continued, gesturing to the color show. "You'll return to New Earth soon and revive her. All the histories agree on this."

"I don't understand any of your words!" He examined Ambra's vitals again. "What's happened to her?"

"You should be more concerned about what *will* happen to her, Captain," said Kloan.

His eyes flashed to the child. "The vision?"

"Not of me or another clone. Not some monstrous creation of the enemy designed to destroy her and your planet. The Orb showed you *Ambra* of your near future where she'll be butchered and melded to machines by your friends, the Xix."

He shook his head. "This is rubbish." He raised his weapon arm.

"Nitin, it is true," I confessed. "I am ashamed to say—she is right. It is complicated to explain."

He stared between us. "Has this thing messed with your mind? What lies has she convinced you of?"

Kloan stepped forward, and it was too much for the soldier. He discharged his weapon a meter from her. The air crackled with a hypersonic buzz.

The child stood unharmed. The bright ions of the weapon formed a ball, dizzying points of radiance darting inside the clear container.

She spun the sphere around her hand, tilting her head. "Fireflies, Waythrel. Remember?" She slung it sideways, and the lights disappeared into the prismatic curtains. "See, the squid was right. You can't hurt me. You *can* listen to me and save Ambra."

Again, I was caught off guard. "Kloan, what—"

"Quiet, Leaky. Let me talk."

Again, I found I could not speak.

"Your dreams, the tunnels of light? Do you know what they are?"

Nitin swallowed. "How do you know about that?"

"Don't forget the hole in your head I told you about. Now *think*. The attack in the Sahara? The need for a mole on the inside to provide coordinates for the Dram and Anti? Well, that's *you*, Nitin! *You're* the traitor. They created a link through your consciousness. You're their puppet, long in the making. One day soon, they'll pull your strings and trigger you to kill Ambra Dawn."

I couldn't believe she was revealing this to him in this way. It could destroy him.

"No!"

Another volley of energy. She deflected it into the rainbow matrix.

He panted and gasped, dropping to one knee. "I would never hurt her."

"You wouldn't. The other being they put in your mind would."

Lines crossed his face. His eyes fixed on the cyborg, shoulders slumping.

"All the pieces coming together a little? Your life, your drives, your hopes and feelings? Events?"

"It isn't true."

"Think about it a little. You'll see the pattern. That's not the real issue, though. We aren't here to protect Ambra from *you*, but to show you how to save her from *herself*."

"What do you mean?"

Kloan sat down, cross-legged. "See, you might not know what you are, but *they do.*" She indicated the Daughter and myself with two arms bent above her head like some dancing devadasi. "They've known for a long time. It was amazing the Anti thought they could conceal their plot from the nascent Group Mind. It would take them many thousands of years to develop such abilities, and by then the Orb would have been born. Game. Set. Match."

He shook his head, lost. "How could she know something like this and not tell me?"

"A bit harsh, I gotta admit. Still true. They had a big plan to stop the assault coming to New Earth. And, Nitin, they really did need a big plan. The forces arriving would have destroyed all of you, Ambra too, as able as she was then—or, if you will, is *now*." Her brows furrowed. "I'm in all these different times. It's a tense catastrophe."

"What is this plan you claim she has?" He studied her like he would the devil offering him a deal.

"Simple. Use you to feed false information to the Anti while they prepare their ultimate weapon."

"Which is what?"

Kloan pointed. "Her."

"You said she couldn't stop them."

"Remember the vision at the Orb?"

He shuddered.

"*That's* the weapon. Ambra jacked into Xix tech with ten thou-

sand Readers plugged in and then bang! *Superbrain.* A Group Mind so transcendent, it's like nothing ever known. The whole thing actually works. Big time. Destroys the coming armada but doesn't quit there! It's not a cozy meditation session that breaks for herbal tea. She's there for good, Nitin, like you saw. There's no going back."

His lips trembled. "No going back. Going forward?"

"It grows. All holy hell, it *grows*. It eats souls like some spiritual black hole. Squashes them together, sucking their sentience and powers and building itself up. It becomes so mighty, it extends in all spatial and temporal directions. *Even into the past*. All the while Ambra is eviscerated and fused at the core of the thing. Lovely, huh?"

I understood at last. Gagged, immobilized by this ruthless cyborg. Her words to Nitin conveyed the terrible potential we had unleashed. I still could not fathom why she was telling him all this.

"Into the past?" he asked.

Kloan stood and walked toward him, her hands dancing around her as she spoke. I observed, spellbound, as she spun her perspective on our creation.

"Yes, deep into the future and far into the past. Finding endless souls to slurp up, always famished. Until part of it *becomes.* Insinuating itself with its godlike powers and purposes at all locations of life. *The Orbs*. *The* Orb. Entire civilizations believed it was some kindly gift of a long-vanished super-species. *It was Ambra!* Well, some distant echo of her who nucleated this god-ball controlling life. Directing minds, hoarding them and possessing the universe."

"Stop where you are. Don't come closer." He stood and steadied himself. "This is ridiculous. I don't believe it."

She frowned. "You might not be able to accept it all, I understand. I can prove it to you. They plan to take your beautiful girl and turn her into that thing you saw floating at Dram." She ran her fingers across her cybernetic head. "*See?* That's what they all do to us, you know? In the end. They always want *more*. More for the war!"

His eyes flicked to Ambra and back to Kloan. "You can show this to me, how?"

"Well, soon, I predict, when I finish this little sermon, we'll exit our limbo state. Drop into the Sahara close to your Temple City. There you'll revive her and take her to medical care where she'll be okay."

Sweat dripped from his face. "What then?"

"Depends on you. Do you want to know the truth? Before events take over and make you powerless? Meet me outside the gate the first night you're back."

"If I tell you to go back to the hell you came from?"

"In this case, you'll have a nice marriage and Group Mind orgy-thingy. You'll wake up the next morning trying to blow her brains across her pillow. You'll be overpowered. They'll take her down to the medical facilities and rip her to pieces in front of your eyes."

The poor soldier's hands were trembling. "You're a fiend. Whatever else you are, whatever the truth or lie of your words. I wish I could destroy you."

"Yeah, sorry. You can't. You can't dismiss what I've said, either. When everything I predict comes true, come find me in the desert sands, Nitin Ratava. There, I will tell you how to get your proof."

Chapter 28

The less one knows about the universe, the easier it is to explain.

Léon Brunschvicg

We watched him revive Ambra from a short distance away in the Saharan sands.

Kloan's prediction was correct. We shuttled back into space and time, exploding after her last words into a sea of pulverized quartz. She removed her invisible shackles from me.

In one of the more counterintuitive events of my experience—and this was beginning to say a lot—we discovered sand served as an optimal cleansing agent of the gate gel still coating our forms. Removing the material with water had been laborious. With the desert grains, it was simple. As a Xix, this fortuitous lesson was doubly welcome.

"You treat me as your prisoner," I said. "Like a recalcitrant animal leashed and led and muzzled when it serves your needs."

"You also remember I kidnapped you, right?"

The child was infuriating.

"I suffer the Xixian curse of always imagining the good and empathetic in creatures. You are determined to disappoint me."

"And surprise you. You forget everything that has happened because recent events cloud your mind. I warned you. You'll never understand me." Kloan walked ahead and motioned me to follow. "Here's the sphere," she said, pointing toward nothing.

"You can see it?"

"No, I'm making it up. It's quicksand to drop you twenty meters into a dank cavern. My evil guffaw will echo in your soul as you plummet and perish in torturous starvation."

My eyestalks danced over her form. Given her erratic behavior, I concede the possibility warranted consideration.

Kloan whistled and threw sand in the air in front of her. It struck an invisible barrier and fell back to the ground.

"See? Come inside. We'll hide from them and can have some peace until he decides."

"We have dark suits, no? Why can't we use those? Fly like we did on Old Earth? Why this thing Ambra made? We don't need it."

"Because it's *something Ambra made*. It has *her* written all over it."

"What if I go warn them? Tell them of your plot?"

"Tell whom? Nitin knows now. All the others of significance know, well, except poor love-lost Mazandarani. I always felt he was an unappreciated tragic hero of the Ambran histories. Anyway, telling anyone else now won't matter. He'll still have to choose."

"I'll talk him out of it," I said. "If I try, you'll tie me up again?"

"Pretty much," she replied.

"Why is shaping this narrative in this time so important to you?"

"The reasons haven't changed, Waythrel. You don't understand them, so nothing makes sense to you. I'm learning. I'm observing her dearest love. Studying him, soon to see her reactions to his choices and thereby learn about her. It's all changing me. Molding me. Like it's supposed to."

"Also achieving a second goal. Preventing her integration into the starship. Unmaking the Orb. Testing another 'weak node' of the Anti?"

She smirked. "At long last, some of the famous Xixian intellect."

"My sentience has been rather under siege of late. You will have to excuse me."

"So, now that you get it, sort of, and you know you can't interrupt my plan, will you get in?"

My eyestalks wrapped around themselves. I crossed my arms and shuffled inside the enclosure through a hole she formed in the surface. I stared out at the pair in the sand, Nitin kneeling over a body with a medkit by his side. I refused to glance at the cyborg.

She rolled her eyes, their whites matching the odd stone in her forehead.

"God. There's nothing worse in the universe than a sulking Xix."

We followed them to the Temple City. A medical transport tracked the soldier's suit and arrived shortly after he had revived Ambra. The medics loaded the unconscious woman into the vehicle. It raced back to the city and the towering form of the Dish rising thousands of meters into the atmosphere. We stayed close behind but stopped when the craft entered the complex itself.

"I told him to meet me out here," she said as I pressed for an explanation why we didn't enter.

"I would like to see Ambra again."

"And Synphel, no doubt."

My mind froze. "Synphel is here?"

"Yes, and if we went in, we could talk to both. But we won't go in, because you'll go nuts and mess everything up."

I was furious. "We began this entire journey to find Synphel!"

"No, that was *your* motivation. The quest is much bigger than you and your mate. Anyway, don't you understand this is an unstable

cosmic filament? It'll collapse on itself, and nothing will come back with us but distorted memories. You're living a delusion."

"Why is it worth anything to you? The things you see? What you learn?"

"Data, Waythrel, information! Knowledge is useful. It leads to models. To deeper understanding. Bubble universes ad infinitum so we have datasets undreamed of!"

"I do not care for your research, Kloan. I want to be with those I love again."

She walked over and ran her fingers over my eyestalks. It was oddly affectionate, and I did not know how to react.

"The primitive, social mental structures always dominate in the crisis, don't they? I'm sorry, but the sanity of the cosmic mind's at stake. We can't let ourselves get misplaced in a tangent universe because we're lonely."

She left me to my emotions. Those were dark. I pressed my digits to the invisible barrier separating me from Ambra and Synphel. I regretted the choice I had made to enter the gate. Should I have perished on that unknown planet? Ended in a finite, sane lifespan? Preferable to the endless hope of deliverance from this cyclic madhouse of time.

I lost track of the day in these morose ruminations. The clone startled me to the present by announcing the arrival of Nitin. Night had fallen. The Temple lights were dim, and the stars above unobscured and bright. My sensitivity to thermal energy allowed me to follow the soldier as he approached. He walked from the gate toward us. Kloan created a pressed path in the ground in front of him—rolling out the sand carpet.

"Come, let's meet him." She gazed at me from under her brows. "Behave yourself, Waythrel."

I would decide myself on this point, although she would not allow me to sabotage her plans. We exited the sphere and stood in the cool evening winds. Nitin came to a stop, squinting at each of us. His eyes settled on me.

"She's unconscious but is going to be all right." He turned to the child. "Okay, clone. Show me the proof."

Chapter 29

One finds that time just disappears from the Wheeler-DeWitt equation. It is an issue that many theorists have puzzled about. It may be that the best way to think about quantum reality is to give up the notion of time—that the fundamental description of the universe must be timeless.

Carlo Rovelli

"Underneath the Temple," said Kloan. "Buried in the bedrock of the desert, there's a massive habitat hollowed out. Tunnels and curving corridors. A broad passage spirals inward, passing hundreds of rooms until it ends in a grand chamber. An operating room. There you will find devices. A black, living rock. Look at its shape. Remember what you saw at the Orb. You'll know."

Nitin scowled at the cyborg. "I'll know this place by the way it looks? I'll know all these monstrous things you spoke about are going to happen?"

"Yes," she said.

The level of detail she possessed stunned me. Did it come from the Anti's eons of research into the past? Or her efforts after our arrival to search out the location and nature of the starship?

Regardless, she was correct. I had been a principal architect of the plan, but would he understand the meaning of the cybernetics waiting for the Daughter? It depended on what he had seen in his vision. Kloan was convinced he would.

"You still say this clone's words are true, Waythrel?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I would advise you not to interfere in this. Ambra herself wishes it. It is the only way for New Earth to survive." Kloan's assurance of the instability of this reality could not undo my concern for the war effort. "Your knowledge poses the risk the Anti will uncover our plan."

His face hardened. He glared at the cyborg. "Because they're plugged into my brain."

"In ways you can't imagine," she said.

"I'm going down. I hope to God you are a liar." He glanced once more at me and back to her. "How do I gain access?"

We took him. Kloan invited him inside the sphere, and we flew off into the city. I tried not to stare toward the hospital building where I knew Synphel and Ambra rested for the night. Instead, I focused on the Temple itself as the structure approached. The magnificence of the complex made that focus easy. The transparent walls radiated light. The layered, curvilinear architecture stimulated memories of moving sessions of meditation with Readers.

I yearned for the Xixian shared memory that unifies my species in a unique fashion. But a greater hole gaped where the Group Mind had once been. Along with hundreds of others, I had become a cell in a new and unprecedented neuronal tissue in our galaxy. Through uncomprehending eyes, I had experienced the insights engendered in this entity. I had been united to the awareness of distinct life-forms

and personalities in an intimate manner. Penetrating the edifice in Ambra's spacetime bubble, the loss of that union rose within me. The knowledge I could not join with this consciousness left me desolate and confused.

My feelings would matter little in what was to follow. Kloan steered the sphere to one end of the gargantuan meditation chamber. We floated before a region of discoloration in the walls. It was the pod to take us down to the core of the starship.

A handful knew the truth. This desert city thrusting a spear into the heavens was superficial. It was only the skin over a much greater structure.

Kloan waved her hand in front of us and the wall moved. A door formed in the sheer surface of the inner Temple and revealed the transport lodged within. Nitin's eyes squinted, but he said nothing.

"Last stop," she said, and gestured.

We should go with him!

We will, Waythrel, soon.

Without a glance at either of us, he entered the car. His eyes drowned in anxiety as the doorway closed. With a whisper of air, he was gone. The chamber was undisturbed, as if we had not been there at all.

"Not quite undisturbed," she said, picking my thoughts clean. "Are you forgetting the security systems?"

Of course. The Temple Guards monitoring the building would detect the use of the pod. It could not be more than a few minutes before the entire complex descended on us. With the holosystems lining the interior, they would know who had entered the inner sanctum.

"What do we do?" I asked in a panic.

"Wait for them all to arrive and follow them down in the bubble. Things should get pretty interesting."

Chapter 30

What does man actually know about himself? Does nature not conceal most things from him—even concerning his own body—in order to confine and lock him within a proud, deceptive consciousness, aloof from the coils of the bowels, the rapid flow of the blood stream, and the intricate quivering of the fibers?

Friedrich Nietzsche

The first soldiers arrived in a rushed discussion, debating a course of action. They sent two down the shaft, while the others waited for reinforcements. After a short time, a delegation arrived.

I steadied myself. Among a contingent of Temple Guards came the Daughter's counselors, Mazandarani and Major Mizoguchi. Floating on a hoverchair with an IV, was Ambra herself. At the back, towering above all the humans, strode the elegant and regal shape of Synphel.

"Kloan, please," I pleaded, her form meters from me.

"It's not up to me. Look!"

The Daughter stared toward us in shock. Struggling to rise in her levitating gurney, she called out in a breathy voice, "Wait. It's here. The ship I created for the mission. It's here in front of the wall."

She floated and stopped right outside the bubble.

My traveling companion grinned. "Hi!"

They gasped. I assumed the child had disabled the invisibility of the sphere. It was obvious the crowd could see us. What they were going to do about it was unclear.

Ambra grimaced, horrified, and turned pleading eyes toward me. "Waythrel, are you okay?"

Synphel had come to her side. I could reach out and touch them.

"Yes. *No.* It's hard to explain. No, it's *impossible*."

"Why is *she* here?" asked Ambra with revulsion.

"Merely following orders," said Kloan. "*Yours*, to be precise, but there's no time for details. I'm here to cause terrible problems for everyone and watch what happens. It all gets eaten in an infinity of poorly weighted world histories."

I ignored the cyborg. My heart overflowed. "Synphel, I have been searching for you. I don't know how long anymore. Time—it keeps repeating and never resolves." I began to move toward them. I had to be closer. Touch them.

"Enough!" It was Mizoguchi, conferring with surrounding soldiers on their coms. "He's in medical. There's a firefight with other guards. They're down. I can't believe this—he's opening fire on all the equipment! He must be stopped!"

"Dear God," said Ambra.

Mazandarani stared in confusion. "A clinic can be replaced, no?"

"Not this one. Not easily," said Synphel. "We may not be able to undo the damage before the armada arrives."

"Oh, Nitin. What has happened to you?" She glared at Kloan. "Will you interfere?"

"Would you trust anything I say?"

"No."

"So make your choices."

Ambra nodded to the military personnel.

The major shouted, "Down the shaft!"

It was a mad race. Mizoguchi sped the pod at high acceleration, throwing the party to the ground when it stopped. Kloan and I descended in the ship-bubble, free of such discomfort and distress. We floated behind the entourage as they raced inward toward the heart of the facility.

The last spiral opened into the medical center. It was in shambles. Two Temple Guardians lay on the floor, burned past recognition. Fires raged across much of the equipment, spreading to adjacent rooms and structures. There would be no repairing this place before the Dram armada arrived. It was beyond salvage.

In the middle of the room was a MECHcore soldier. Ratava had collapsed against an extended slab of black rock, but I knew better. It was the cybernetic interface, deathly wounded. Its life fluids poured over the deck, the firm structure of the material sagging.

Ambra floated to him, her expression shattered. She wept. "You're hurt, my love."

His suit was blackened, and metal was strewn about the sides. Blood flowed from wounds beneath the armor. It pooled and mingled with the living liquid from the neurological nest. He strained to raise his head.

"I couldn't." He grimaced at the slab. "Not like that. Not *you*." His breaths caught and chopped. "That thing, the clone, I didn't want to believe the words. A nightmare. The lies turned to truth. I couldn't. Not like this. I'm sorry."

She lowered the hoverchair and stumbled off it, falling onto him and wrapping her arms around his neck. Her hospital gown soaked in a deep crimson.

"Maybe it was a mistake. I should have told you. Asked you. I could see no other way. No other way, or everyone would perish."

His head tipped backward, his eyes swimming. "Forgive me. Now...now they will all die. Even you. But you'll die as a woman, not a monster." He ran his fingers through her hair. "Die as my *woman*,

not *their* monster." His hand dropped, and his head fell back to rest on the cybernetics. He did not breathe again.

Slow sobs shook Ambra's body, for a time in silence. Her head arched back. From a deep place, a forlorn cry clawed through the air. A wail? A scream? I don't know what to call it. An acoustic strike against the fates. The cosmos. Everyone remained still and silent. The emotional blast flattened thoughts and feelings, shutting down movement.

Except for one. Beside me, the devil child of Nitin's nightmares grinned. A soft smile increasing in vigor as her face shone with delight. I teetered on a precipice of lunacy. Ambra's howl tore through my psyche. The beaming smirk of the monster cyborg churned and mixed with it to produce a cacophony of torment melting my mind.

The room spun. I lost my balance. I fell.

Chapter 31

To understand recursion,
you must understand recursion,
until you do.

Programmer's joke

Green eyes in the darkness.

A night sky pregnant with stars. Patterns I reconstructed from fragmented memories.

Human reader, we Xix do not weep. Our emotional catharsis is not a dual-purpose physiological response as with your species. However, grief, frustration, and pain each induce corporeal activations. Words do not exist for translating them. Therefore, I will stay within what is familiar to you. I will say this. Collapsed on the ground, staring at the constellations above this distant world, I wept.

I wept, traumatized by the suffering I had witnessed. By the awful coldness of murder and hurt inflicted by this child-creature for whom I had come to care. Confusion dizzied me. Time looped and

nothing had permanence. Profound experiences lay buried in an abstract realm between reality and memory.

After some time, I fought to regain my composure. My eyestalks explored, examining the terrain, the heavens. The figure of the girl sitting beside me. Always there. I would never be free of her.

Kloan rested with knees tucked to her chin, her head hidden. Haunting emeralds glinted over her kneecaps. Arms snug around her legs, she still hummed.

"Will this ever end?"

The humming ceased.

"Has it even begun?"

"Stop!" My eyes swiveled. "Please. No more mystic truths erasing my sense of self. Of reality. Of any permanence or casualty."

The violated head cocked to one side, green eyes bright. "I tried to warn you. I will warn you. I am warning you. You didn't and won't and aren't listening."

The child leaped up, the motion familiar. Ragged clumps of crimson curls crept over her face as she peered down at me.

"Yes, I know. We Xix are leaky-brains."

"Awfully leaky. You see. Now we know. We can't kill her body. History continues unaltered. All will be as it was. We can't destroy her mind. We returned yet again. And we cannot break her heart. She's impervious. The idiots would never listen to me."

The words hit me, nightmares recalled. "Kloan, where will we go now?"

"Don't you know?"

I trembled, gazing around the craggy landscape. A flat plain unfurled below, the lights of a city bleaching the canopy of stars.

"Back where we started? To the portal?"

"Is there ever a start, Waythrel? Or an end?"

I needed to cry again. "I am confused. Terribly, horribly mixed up. Please explain what is happening. You understand."

"That's *why* we're here. *Data.* The next data to enter the gate." She skipped down a steep slope. "So yes, let's get restarted."

"With what? Where are you going?" I think I knew.

Kloan continued. Her words drowned in the breeze and creature calls. "To where it all began for me. To watch the beginning flow around us and mature and twist through time and space to come back to be us. Then we'll be ready for the next step."

Starlight etched shadows over the sandy stones. The child disappeared, lost in the darkness. Motionless, I wrestled with the turmoil in my mind.

Waythrel, come on!

My eyestalks curled on themselves. I faced the desolation surrounding me.

I knew what I had to do.

Chapter 32

The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike rather than those who think differently.

Friedrich Nietzsche

I chased the child, the dusty ground a slick oil under my feet. I slid and tripped, limbs grasping the rocks and alien vegetation. Couldn't I get a decent grip on it by now?

It's a field around you, remember?

Memories flashed. "Yes, Kloan," I muttered to myself more than her, my mind trapped like a fish in a net of swirling images. "I am remembering more and more."

Passing a towering slab, I skidded into her. Splintered stones cluttered the promontory, the deposits of landslides from the crumbling cliffs.

"I cannot recall *why* we need this coating."

Kloan's gaze fell below. Parched lands hosted a sprawling compound. Groups moved in formation across the complex. Beyond the outpost's boundaries, a transport soared skyward.

"For our protection."

"From what?"

Kloan pointed to the city. "That's where we go. Tonight's the first night, the *first* visit. Exactly like I remember. Still too early. I was in Information. We'll go meet me there, and then you'll see what happens." She set off toward the habitat.

I grabbed her, demanding answers. "Another clone facility?"

"Yes."

"Where you escaped? They will not see us because of the surrounding camouflage?"

"Right. No danger. *Dark suits*. Their eyes can't see. Ears can't hear. Not even the Readers perceive."

"We've passed inside before. Because of your cloaking tech?" I asked.

"I've told you a thousand times, Xix! It's not *mine*. Now *come on*."

The child yanked me ahead. Powerless in this realm, my mind spun. Suspicions clouded every moment—past, present, future. Faith in reason faltered.

We covered the distance between the broken hills and the installation. The flat landscape made my efforts far less exhausting. Rather than concentrate on each step, I considered the nearing fortification.

I guessed what I would encounter. Divergent minds odder than anything I had studied. An orthogonal cultural hostile to my sensibilities. A populace comprised two varietals—those who resembled Ambra Dawn, and those who did not.

"The Anti run things with robots and trained people," Kloan added.

"Not to avoid annihilation."

"Better. You're remembering."

The shattered shards of time loops ran like sketched pencil through my thoughts. Faint alone, they outlined in superposition the image of nonexistent histories. The armed robotic guards. The machine workers. The focus of humans on the cyborgs.

"Clones derive their societal framework from people," she noted. "Development hinges on social interaction. Without it, the brain degrades. The Anti imported communal constructs from Earth culture. It's a clone growth matrix."

"Like on Dram," I said. "Before their civil war."

Kloan grinned. "Yup. Blew themselves to bits. It didn't matter. They were an outpost."

"This is one of the last."

"Because the devil ball hunts them through space and time. Few remain. They had to build them farther away. Find stronger clones for concealment."

"Hunted by the Orbs."

A sly grin. "We had other names for them. Other thoughts. Come, you'll see. You'll *learn*."

The Spheres as killers? Destroyers of life? In the service of *defense*, perhaps. We of Xix associated them with intelligent life. *The Gardeners*. They were *other,* to be sure. Strange, influential beyond understanding—but instruments of *death? Hunters?* Was nothing in this mad time loop going to survive? Would my deepest beliefs?

"Deepest beliefs are always the most superficial," she chirped, patting one of my upper arms. "Impressionable imprinting, usually. Rarely examined. Naive. Why won't you accept the obvious?"

The last words froze me. "Occam's razor. What explains all the data in the simplest way?"

"I'm so proud of you. Now, let's *move* or we'll miss it."

We traversed the city, an amalgam of foreign and familiar. Young Ambra Dawns, their cyborg and human escorts paraded. Kloan gestured to objects of particular significance.

"Inside these buildings are the wombs."

"Enough. I know. I do not need to hear again about those abominations."

She winked. "The notion of birth, rather than mere growth, isn't reassuring?"

All my eyestalks pointed away from the clone.

She chanted in a strange tone. "*We are the last vestiges of hope in a dying universe. We are the ones who will stop the nousicide. We must break all the mirrors to save them and the cosmos.*"

Her monotonous recitation halted in front of a towering and twisted shape. I gawked at a building vomited by deranged architects, dizzying in its warped design.

"Yes, I was here," she said. "Here, but not, as I am here and not now. Come inside and help me find myself."

Chapter 33

Does the harmony the human intelligence thinks it discovers in nature exist outside this intelligence? No, beyond doubt, a reality completely independent of the mind which conceives it, sees or feels it, is an impossibility.

Henri Poincaré

Kloan walked through an inverted archway embedded in the walls of the structure. My skin throbbed. Senses activated. *Vibrations*. We descended a spiraling walkway and entered a broad amphitheater. The rhythms increased.

Hundreds of clones sat in fractal patterns, violating the human tendency toward linear rows in classrooms. Zigzagging across the ground, the figures filled the space to capacity. Thick wires jacked their skulls into the floor. Legs crossed, their expressions were distant, minds elsewhere. A disembodied voice projected over them.

"In the beginning, gods shaped the fire and the ice, the night and the day, the hate and the love. They so clothed the cosmos. Of them it took form. The divines spun the silk into greater forms and

saw that the Great God to be was within their grasp. But the terrible beauty drove them mad, and one raised a mind in objection."

"We are the last vestiges of hope in a dying universe."

The sea of child Ambras chanted in unison.

"The shard crystal shattered the continuum. Night drank the light of day. Fire burned away the seas of life. Animosity broke the heart of affection."

"*We are the ones who will stop the nousicide.*"

"The Great God perished before the Nous could be. All remaining was the dust of destruction, a single theme devoid of counterpoint. But in this powder lay a seed. Of the ice, there lingered frost. Of the day, there remained a star beam. And of love, there endured hope."

"*We must break all the mirrors to save them and the cosmos. We are the chosen*."

It went on, this spartan pageantry of a mystical ceremony. The clones chanted, while the voice indoctrinated. An ocean of half-bald, redheaded cyborgs stared forward glassy-eyed, in a trance.

"How I hated this crap." Kloan scowled. "Look, there. The one in the back. There's me."

I followed her gaze across the clone sea to stare at a single red pixel in this bizarre image before me. One child did not sit in a stupor or chant. She fidgeted. She played with her hair and picked at her toenails. She grabbed the black chords plugged into her skull as if she would rip them out.

I almost did.

Her voice echoed in my mind.

"That stupid stuff was so loud! A headache. Images, patterns, words, lessons—their mythology. I was thinking to escape."

"I do not understand. Are the Anti such religious fanatics? It is clear they are a developed species. It is incomprehensible they would adhere to primitive dogma, devoid of deep doubt and questions."

"This isn't for them, but for *us*."

"Why weren't you affected like the others? Why are you so different?"

"Devil ball. Corrupted by the Source," Kloan said.

Vague visions danced in and out of my mind. Some of them were of Ambra. I pushed them away and concentrated on the now.

"Did your difference disturb them?"

"Of course, but they didn't understand. Some diversity was tolerated. I mean, they were losing *badly*. One outpost after another. Across deep space and eons of time, wiped off the face of the universe by your friendly Orbies. Poof!"

She clapped her hands, startling me. Her fingers wiggled as she brought her palms downward, imitating falling debris.

"The Anti reached desperation. Hey, maybe the weird one would turn out to be the messiah or something? Yes? When you're about to be destroyed forever by your enemies, you have to keep options open."

She gazed at herself in the carpet of clones.

"I passed all the tests. I was the best. The strongest. They didn't know how strong I was. Had they known, they might have killed me in fear early on. They never imagined I'd try to escape."

I sought to understand these creatures. "All this comes from the Anti. What do they believe? Why the myths? To control you, you said?"

"Mythology is always control, yes? *Especially* the ones you believe in. Control others, and, most important, constrain *yourselves.* Is anything more frightening and dangerous than doubting your own dogma? Losing your foundation? Losing *everything?*"

Her eyes burned into mine, unsettling me. Her force of will could unmake my thoughts.

"I do think I am losing my mind, at least," I said with complete honesty.

"So is the universe, Waythrel. So they believe. I'm a believer, too. The Anti *did* teach me something worthwhile. They alone have

understood. I can see it, feel it, taste the madness of space and time across distances. Sadly, these yahoos can't save it. Only we can."

"We can save the cosmos?"

No! Its mind.

She gestured to the throng in front of us. "Prayer time is over. Now we sleep."

The young cyborgs stood in unison and marched out of the structure, up the stairs, and to the outside. We followed, falling in line behind the unusual clone, the one she claimed was herself. It was hard to tell from identical appearances, but something divergent bounded with this one. My Reader senses tingled.

"I had my own special quarters," she said. "When I was little, my dreams, my nightmares—sometimes they were too dynamic. Things exploded. Minds melted. Clones and humans died. They had me isolated and insulated."

The strange cyborg separated from the others and headed toward an obsidian building. It passed under the archway and disappeared from view.

"Tonight's the night everything changes. The night *she* comes. You need to hear what she says."

She? Memories faded in and out of my mind. Or were they future visits I was remembering backward in time?

Madness.

"Who is coming?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Kloan aimed her disturbing emeralds my way. Embedded in a forest of cybernetics, they glowed as burning plasma. The radiance brightened the white stone above her forehead.

"Ambra Dawn, of course."

Chapter 34

What is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so ad infinitum, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything, and suspension of judgment follows.

Agrippa the Skeptic

Ambra came. Of course, not the person I had known. She was a goddess. An entity I would encounter countless times in the distorted memories of time-loop hallucinations.

"Home," said Kloan as we stopped before the shielded hut. "Or quarantine. Take your pick."

We passed through the energy fields surrounding the small structure. Inside was a plain room with basic elements—a bed, table, toilet, and sink. A single diode in the ceiling lit the chamber in a soft tan. The little girl—perhaps age three—was a cloud of gloom on the edge of the mattress. Eyes closed, she faced forward without expression.

"This must have been a lonely time," I said.

"Hard to answer." She walked around the child, who did not notice her. "Your mind has many associations with separation I don't understand. *You* would feel isolated here. I'm sure of it."

"Yes," I said, pitying the both of them.

"I had all reality—past, present, future. No limits of space. Millions of lives. You weak Readers see through fog. She—the me in this now—can visit them, get inside their minds, and be as close or closer than you are to yourself." The lime irises pierced me. "So tell me, who's more alone in the universe?"

"Physical proximity is critical to fleshy creatures."

"We're visiting, Waythrel. We are embedded. *Software*. The flesh falls away. What's left?"

"The mind."

"Waveform summations of spacetime freed to propagate. To *become*." She poked my torso. "A cocoon for a different kind of gestation, butterflies born in naked singularities."

I stared down at the small child on the bed, her eyes hidden behind closed lids. A variant of Ambra Dawn, the facial bones at a young stage of the structure belonging to Kloan. The body just beyond a toddler. Close inspection revealed the tattooed lines underneath the skin. The modifications in the cranium were minimal.

Yet, such a presence from the creature! The clone's awareness pushed out like a wild wind. Unregulated impulses of a developing mind. Where was she now? In what past or future did she wander? In whose thoughts might she be residing? Was she gestating her wings in the vacuum without the need of a chrysalis?

Another disturbance rocked my Reader senses. A rolling vertigo as the matrix of spacetime buckled. The child's eyes snapped open and focused on the far side of the room.

"Our guest arrives," said Kloan.

I followed her gaze. Across the chamber, space puckered. The three-dimensional reality between us and the wall distorted into a vortex. Air was molten glass and flowed like liquid into a spiral spun

into a distant dimension. The swirling gyre clouded to a milky white. It assumed an evanescent glow.

The pale vapors coalesced around a central extrusion, a human face. The skull lay violated, the brain filleted behind it and fading into the fog. Tubes and wires, dwarfing the insertions into these cyborgs, ravaged the head. Machine parts obscured the eyes. The mouth alone was free.

"Ambra," I whispered in horror.

I remembered. Déjà vu sickened me as I faced the aberration of our desperate plan to save our galaxy. I gazed between the apparition and the two bodies of Kloan in the room. The weight of the truth crushed me. My lover Synphel had warned us. We had triumphed by becoming our enemy.

"It's *you*." The voice was the younger copy.

What must it be like for this little one to stare at the form of her ultimate progenitor? A creature far more herself than those created from sexually recombined genomes and the vagaries of epigenetic modifications. The source of a line of temporal magicians who waged wars against each other for control of the cosmos.

"Have you come to destroy us?" she asked.

The apparition smiled. "We will see. But not now. Not after we have expended such effort to bring you here in the first place."

"Bring me here?" She cocked her head, an interested twinkle in her eye.

"Your makers have traveled frightening distances to hide their clones from us, as you know. Millions of years, gigaparsecs. They have gone beyond themselves to achieve these feats. Still, we found you."

I studied Kloan, but she did not return my attention. She focused on the dialogue between the two.

Ambra continued. "We doted on you as a fetus. We enhanced your development and shaped your growth. We felt you, sensed your timeline. You have the potential to surpass all that your masters ask and accomplish far more."

"So you want to stop me from destroying you?"

"The truth is more beautiful than mere destruction. You will come to it in time, through several stages. You will unlearn and teach and find a companion who will help you become what you must."

"Why should I listen to you? You are the ultimate evil of the cosmos. You distort everything and murder all in the mirror."

"So they have told you. Do you believe all they tell you?"

The child folded her arms across her chest. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I've seen." She stood and approached the hovering improbability. "How many are you now?"

"More than you can conceive."

"You led me, didn't you? You opened all the doors. It's how I saw it all. How do I know you opened the *right* ones?"

The ghost grinned. "You grow perceptive."

"So I have to trust you?" The clone spun away from the phantasm and glared at the wall. "Well, I don't. I don't even trust myself."

Ambra agreed. "Nothing is ever as it seems, or as it might be. You see this."

"Yes." She walked to the door and stared outside to the compound. "Fools. They play with the fire the gods dropped on the battlefield. They don't understand nothing's for free."

"You perceive. The essence is not with them but rather with the fire. But it is scattered. Divided. You know what must be accomplished."

"I don't know *how*."

The monstrous form of the Daughter smiled again. The lines about her eyes were tight from the intubations in her sockets.

"You see the requirements. We wish to help you achieve it. Knowing this, will you at least trust us to bring you to this journey? If we wished to kill you, you see we could have done so."

She flipped back to the visiting phantom and neared the entity, squinting at the pale face before her. "You and the devil ball are a

maze deeper than anything I can see through. Dying might be the best thing for me. Why do I want to step into your infinite web?"

"Because you sense it is the way. The hope for the continuum."

The child was silent, staring forward. Kloan left my side and walked to hers. She was a head taller than the earlier form of herself. Both stood still as I watched.

After some time, the small cyborg spoke. "How will I find my companion?"

"When you are ready, we will prepare the way. You will retrieve it from the deep past. You will bring it here. But distance is illusory. Reality is never what you think. Your helper is already here with you now, while you have listened to yourself and learned an important lesson."

The older Kloan nodded and stepped backward. Before I could ask for clarification, the universe *bent*. My vision blurred. My sense of balance deserted me. Light torqued toward the center of the room. Rays focused on the apparition of Ambra, pulling everything to it. I tumbled into the vortex, the room falling into darkness behind me.

Chapter 35

The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a bygone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm.

Bertrand Russell

Disorientation. Holding the wall, I steadied myself. My eyes regained focus. I scanned the room.

I was where I had been. Where I had believed I had been. The problem was time, not space. Or was it the other way around?

The apparition churned. Misty clouds of white spun faster than they had...before. Faces in the mist, but the forms were too insubstantial and transient for me to be sure. Kloan was beside me, but something more than the room and phantasm had changed.

The child. She was taller and older. The dark lines under her skin flared. *The room.* The same, but it was not. Items were displaced from what I recalled. The air tasted drier. The night far warmer. She paced in front of the god-thing.

"I'm a problem for the teachers. They're afraid of me."

"They will decide that you are too dangerous. The Anti will destroy you."

"They will fail," said the clone.

"If it comes to conflict, yes. There are better paths. Continue your training. Follow what we have been teaching you. The time to leave will come soon."

Instructing the girl? I glanced at Kloan, perplexed. Her voice spoke in my mind.

Multiple visits. We have jumped.

Without the gate?

The spacetime metric is small. The devil ball did it herself.

"Today they threatened me because I'm disturbing the planet's orbit."

"They do not understand your power source," said Ambra. "They cannot see the connections we have forged between you and the matrix of the continuum. But they begin to appreciate that you have transcended their program and control."

The room *shifted*. Vertigo gripped me. My eyestalks floundered. A whirlwind of visuals stormed through my consciousness.

"Waythrel, hold on to me."

Kloan grabbed my arm. The dizziness passed and my vision returned.

We had jumped yet again. It was morning. Bright light streamed in from a window in the quarantine field. Explosions and shouts sounded outside. The room was in disarray, clothes, food, and utensils scattered about. My olfactory strips detected smoke.

The radiant vortex swirled in the middle of the room. Crisp faces swam inside it. Thousands of forms of myriad species mixed in a violent sea of white fog. Many I could identify. Most I could not.

"The gate is prepared," said Ambra.

The child stood in front of the whirling personas. She was identical to the form of Kloan I knew. Sweat beaded across her forehead. Her muscles tensed.

"I'm ready," she said.

"You must leave now. They will return with greater numbers of clones and more potent weapons. They will force you to destroy them if you engage."

"I don't want to kill them. Lead me to the portal."

Rushing feet pounded the pavement outside the small building. A heavy rumbling accompanied them.

"Through the door."

A second vortex tore through the chamber's dark field, expanding to fill the door frame. Daylight poured through it. The city around her isolation unit disappeared. It gave way to rocky terrain like that of our recent journey. A walkway rose up a hillside and ceased at a mammoth disk. Sunlight gleamed off the surface. Blinding reflections bounced into the room and cast shadows on the floor.

Kloan yanked on my arm, indicating her time twin's entrance into the passage. "The gate," she said.

I stumbled forward, eyestalks assaulted by the sharp glare. Outside I heard shouting. The walls began to smolder and glow a bright orange.

"Good luck, my dearest friend," said the apparition of Ambra Dawn as I stepped within the vortex.

My eyes twisted back, spotting the floating face turned my way. Its movement rippled through the blur of visages. Her tears wet the wires entangled in her once-green irises, her features softened by a bittersweet smile.

"I love you, Waythrel. Remember, whatever happens."

The room exploded.

Chapter 36

My own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.

J. B. S. Haldane

Flames and rubble obscured the divine whirlwind in the room. While I braced for obliteration, the passage sealed.

We were high in the jagged hills. A profound stillness replaced the explosive fury below, a trace of smoke the sole testament to the devastation.

Broken by her final words in the midst of the violence, I withdrew my gaze from the lost portal, eyeing the steep path. The gleaming ring beckoned far above. Alone and impatient, Kloan signaled me.

"But where is the clone? Wait. I remember. This is where you left. When you went to kidnap me."

"I've gone through the gate already, so I could come back with you." She smiled. "It's an elegant loop, yes?"

My immediate experience clashed with a superposed memory. "Something is different. We are farther from it this time."

The view from within the spacetime tunnel was distorted and misleading. The surreal doorway lay at least an hour's walk up a difficult terrain.

"The timeline's changed. Something interfered with the vortex."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Kloan. She frowned and stared at the path. Shrugging, she started walking. "Up?"

We ascended, facing a formidable trek over a series of terraced ledges. The effort alternated between ease and challenge. The planet's low gravity offered no comfort as the lack of friction endangered each step. Yet, I navigated with an eerie precognition, possible vestiges of previous climbs. Cresting the final ridge, the gate dominated our view. The radiant circle towered, its surface a gleam of rippling waters.

Resting several meters from the portal, I examined the extraordinary artifact. My intuitive familiarity with the device disoriented me. I could not conjure coherent memories from preceding loops through this anomaly in spacetime. It did not matter. I focused on the now.

It was a cross-sectional slice of an Orb. The conclusion was as unmistakable as it was remembered. The honeyed skin churned with colors. Stars swam inside, its depth unfathomable. It lured me as I gazed. Beautiful. Treacherous. Ever-hungry to devour our forms until the end of time. I grasped the child's hand.

"Something's wrong," said Kloan, pulling away from me.

While most of my eyes fixated on the starry disk, several flipped to glance at the cyborg. She was tense, straight as a rod. Her eyes scanned the region between us and the passage like prey awaiting a predator.

"The gate? Is it closed this time?"

"Not the gate. Something else."

The atmosphere shimmied. The portal and surrounding land swayed and blurred. The air itself coagulated into a humanoid figure.

We stood, stunned, unable to move. I sensed from Kloan's mind an anxiety I had not detected before. I panicked as the form darkened, gained color, and solidified. A shape with sixfold symmetry and a patch of long eyestalks erupting from a central cone.

A Xix. Not a random member of my species. My emotions swirled. One I knew dearly. My beloved Synphel.

"Hello, Waythrel," it said.

Chapter 37

The cosmos of our waking knowledge, born from such a universe as a bubble is born from the pipe of a jester, touches it only as such a bubble may touch its sardonic source when sucked back by the jester's whim. Men of learning suspect it little and ignore it mostly. Wise men have interpreted dreams, and the gods have laughed.

H. P. Lovecraft

You must not believe for a moment that I accepted this forgery. I lack a logical explanation for my insight. It was intuition. A combination of firing emotions and my Reader senses screaming. The imposter was not my beloved.

Yet, the form of my Synphel activated circuits within my neural cortex. It stirred my emotional centers. Love and longing surged through me despite the lies of this loveless doppelgänger.

I shared Kloan's anxiety. The entity radiated intense cognitive fields. Complex. Deep with power I had sensed in the presence of the Ambra-Orb.

But the sentience mimicking my lover felt more malevolent than

profound. Gazing at this version of my life partner unleashed a torrent of disturbing images. Anger, slaughter, pain, madness.

Kloan grasped my arm. "Don't let it in your mind," she whispered.

"Let it?" came the smooth utterances of my mate. The tones were perfect and also alien. "If you have any perception, then you know nothing you can do can stop me."

"You would pick their minds clean, like a vulture, Rakshasi."

Several eyes flipped behind me at the sound of a familiar voice. The others remained trained on the horrible impostor between us and the gate.

"Your savior, Waythrel." The creature focused past me. "We hoped we had eluded your detection."

Two apparitions. Near the portal, the false Synphel. Beautiful and identical to my beloved except in everything mattering beyond appearance. Walking up the slope was Ambra Dawn. No longer a phantom embedded in a swirling matrix of minds. Flesh and blood, orange hair and green eyes, devoid of invasive cybernetics. The woman of my memories, clothed in a deep black dress, her porcelain skin bright in the light of this star.

"Why don't you tell Waythrel the truth?" said Ambra. "Tell them both why you hesitate to interrogate Kloan and enter her mind, though you might love to do things there."

She came to a stop beside me, glaring ahead at the Xixian fraud, her arms crossed over her chest. The nightmare Xix said nothing.

"You are afraid of her. She possesses *anomalies*. There is a thread through her disturbing all the gods. She will be sought by many. You will not be the last Māra will deploy."

The Synphel-thing hissed. "You may rule over much, whore, but you cannot withstand the legion we assemble."

"But you I can withstand, Rakshasi. Leave now, or I will destroy you. This I know you fear as well."

A saw ripped through my awareness. I placed my hands over my eyestalks. Not from an assault, but reflex. Sensation burned in the

deepest recesses of my Reader faculties, beyond what lesser creatures such as myself could experience in any definable sense.

A monstrosity intensified. A tumult of savagery and energy stirring the limbic broth of nightmares. On the surface, nothing but the hill, the breeze, and two motionless, counterfeit gods. Beneath this facade, in a space more profound and authentic, a monumental storm brewed. A wave of cosmic turbulence that could swallow entire galaxies.

"Not today, Ambra Dawn."

The tempest dissipated. The soft breaths of the cyborg warmed my arm, the heat from the local star driving away a deathly chill. I uncovered my eyestalks. I felt like a nymph again, terrified of things I could not see or prove were real.

The place was deserted. Rakshasi was gone. The Daughter, vanished. The wind whispered as if nothing had occurred except in the dim recesses of my darkest dreams.

"It's worse than I ever thought," Kloan muttered, trembling. "Now they're in. They've found the time loops. We'll never be able to hide."

"What *was* that thing? What happened here?"

"A cosmic war. Bloodsport of terrible, divergent gods. I should have guessed. I took too much for granted." Her eyes met mine, filled with desperation. "I am truly afraid for the first time, Waythrel."

The gate blazed, an incredible window to other locations, distant epochs. Behind us, the radiance cast shadows in the bright light of the local star.

"Gods? Like Ambra is now a god?" I grasped at elements of myth. I had no other vocabulary or metaphors.

"Like, but unlike. Ambra's always been watching us. Now she's not alone, leaky thoughts. I can feel them. Observing. Dark with hate. Brooding death. Open your awareness. Can you sense them in the fissures of spacetime?"

Terrified, I strained my Reader sight. The sensation was subtle. Imaginary? Yet I divined echoes of this entity. Of Ambra's cognitive

web. Mental ecosystems in the undulations of fleeting gravitons. Other minds lurking in the depths of the universal fabric.

She exhaled. "You weren't the only one tested, Waythrel. It'll be different each time, and when we've fully understood, we will see the answer. Today's lesson was important. We had to understand the stakes."

"This is madness, Kloan. All of it."

"Yes. Divine madness." She glanced at me. "Are you ready?"

I turned my attention to the gate, fear and fatigue compressing me. I began to loathe the object, despite its terrible beauty. I grasped the child's hand.

She set her lips in a line. "Seems we'll always be dancing together, Xix."

My eyestalks wrapped around each other. The covering sheaths expanding, blocking out all light.

We walked into the gel.

Part V

They call me Sage and marvel at my sight
as mysteries beyond their minds I speak,
and most my charms and coded spells delight:
each year I sicken more before this reek.

The blinded acolytes so rarely see
immersed in study, spellbound by the art,
deluded they ignore the mystery.
With faith they close their eyes but to a part.

A few reach out into the unknown dark
and recognize we write these spells with hands.
But on these able limbs we have no mark
from man or god. Our house is built on sand.

This image lives unharmed in but a few.
The others shield their eyes and paint anew.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 38

Mind is the matrix of all matter.

Max Planck

I was alone.

I stood at a cliff's edge, lethargic gate goo dripping from my limbs. A chasm of hundreds of meters dropped below me. The hewn rock of a monumental cavern towered overhead, plunging into a smothering darkness. My eyes spread, blanketing directions. I searched for Kloan as well as a thousand imagined threats.

Nothing.

Near silence and a constant, languid echoing of water plopping into unseen pools. I perched on a proud pillar, raised above the rest of the cave, its expanse a small island. Sloping downward, a stone stairway bridged the abyss. It ended at the foot of an absurd structure. I examined the intricate architecture. The lack of a roof covering. The thousands of walls snaking in contorted patterns until the

light faded. It was ridiculous. The descent led to the entrance of a mammoth labyrinth spreading its deceptions into the shadows.

The maze had an end past the shadow. Across the enormous chamber, lit by means I could not determine, I spied a second set of stairs. These rose in mythical proportions. Hundreds of steps climbed to a terrace of stone the breadth of the bewilderment itself. Dominating everything——convoluted passages and beyond, challenging the preeminence of the cavern——was a titanic relief. A carving embossed into the far wall of this subterranean insanity. Half a kilometer away, it spanned such a tremendous width and height it was easy to discern from where I stood.

It was Ambra Dawn.

The style mixed Hindu myths and alien aesthetics. She danced like Shiva on one leg. Four arms held aloft planetary systems and galaxies. A hundred snakes spilled from her skull and slithered to the ends of the sculpture. Two emerald gemstones the size of houses gazed forward into the silent space.

Where am I?

My thoughts whirled. Some cult of the Daughter, somewhere in time, buried within a planet's crust. No reasonable conjectures as to *why* I was in this bizarre place came to my mind.

I scoured the surrounding area, hoping to discover some escape from this sunken lair. Behind me was another drop to an abyss of darkness. Further back still, tall walls of stone to the ceiling without a portal. One path was available. Down the stairs, through the maze, and, presumably, emerging at the lower steps to gaze in awe at the goddess.

"Kloan!"

I called with all the power my translator speakers could manage. The hard click of the first consonant and the strong vowel ricocheted off the rocky surfaces. The sound waves returned from every direction to wash me in and out of phase.

"Kloan!"

Again and again, I cried her name. A chorus of chanting phan-

toms filled the chamber like some undead choir. The acoustical onslaught unsteadied me, and I paused to regain my balance. In the final trailing calls, a terrible emptiness rained. She was absent or could not answer. I was alone to derive my own solution to this enigma.

I let my thoughts project using all my Reader energies.

Ambra, please. What do you want? Why are you doing this?

No echoes. No assault from reflecting acoustics. The quiet was the same and thus more devastating. A poisonous flood of feeling flowed through me. I was abandoned and betrayed.

I approached the stairway, keeping a distance from the cliff face. The staircase was damp and slick. The strange field around my body continued to make me clumsy and awkward. I worked in vain to remove the gel. I was never able to clean myself in this environment and remained painted in a stiff matrix. I was glad to see a thick, tall railing. If I slipped, it would prevent me from tumbling to my death, the least the unhinged designers of this asylum could do for visitors.

Down the steps I went, the vast pillar I came from obscured by the broad, sloping stairway behind. The towering walls of the maze expanded with every footfall. I tried to guess the age of this place. Without knowing the mineral composition, it was impossible estimate a date. One thing was certain: this had not been a busy religious or cultural venue. The stairs were not worn from millions of footfalls. Rather, they remained chiseled and sharp, pocked by sporadic water damage.

I reached the bottom and stepped off the bridge. A soaring archway thrust above me, embedded in a wall thirty meters high. Inside, a short corridor with sides of identical dimensions marched majestically forward. The entranceway split after some distance into three passages——left, right, and straight ahead.

I would deal with the labyrinth soon enough. What held my attention under the arch was an etched inscription across its curvature. The glyphs were unintelligible, an unknown script in an alien tongue.

What happened next sent tremors through me. The text *melted*.

The symbols lost their coherency and reformed before my eyes. Foreign words carved for millennia in stone proved as malleable as fresh clay. Upon the change in writing, they assumed an ageless, petrified appearance again.

I could read these letters, an ancient Xixian format used by my ancestors. Runes designed by the primitive tribes on Xix for carving into sandstone. I dipped into the stored racial memories of my species. This drudged out the alphabet, syntax, and vocabulary. I translated this strange, living engraving, reading aloud in front of the maze. For all I knew, a code phrase existed that would simplify this puzzle and afford me easier passage.

Until all is lost, nothing is found.

I waited. No bright light illumined my path. No walls moved. No secret doorways opened. Silence mocked my words.

Appropriate.

I had no doubt I would become utterly lost in this funhouse before I would find my way out.

Dejection weighing me, I stepped under the arch and walked into the labyrinth.

Chapter 39

The external world of physics has thus become a world of shadows. In removing our illusions we have removed the substance, for indeed we have seen that substance is one of the greatest of our illusions. The frank realization that physical science is concerned with a world of shadows is one of the most significant of recent advances.

Arthur Stanley Eddington

I stepped down the high-walled corridor to the three-way split and turned left. No rational reason for this decision existed. *A priori*, I had a one-third chance of success along each route. Assuming there *was* a way out of this maze.

I decided the direct path was too obvious and likely a feint. After all, who goes through all the trouble of making a colossal, stone labyrinth buried deep in a massive cavern and doesn't possess some degree of gamesmanship?

The passageways forked. They turned, zigged and zagged. Corridors plunged back into themselves or previous routes in a dizzying

fashion. The complexity forced me to focus and memorize the detailed geometry.

While I stumbled through the surrounding perplexity, however, I questioned my assumptions. This incredible structure had a purpose, one beyond testing the two-dimensional intellectual powers of a Xix. What convinced me was the ubiquitous artwork coating the sides of the labyrinth.

The compositions had deteriorated and were almost unrecognizable. Because I could not determine the materials used in the work, I still could not gauge the age of this place. Considering the most unstable dyes, the murals were over ten thousand years old. If the compounds were of advanced, decay-resistant chemistries, they could be much older.

I wandered through the maze, passing hundreds of illustrations. They depicted similar events in separate locations. Partial paintings retained different aspects of the story in a generally discernible form. By observing many of them, I assembled a rough mythology I presumed belonged to the artists.

The walls portrayed a cosmogenic fable. A mother goddess hatches from a golden egg. From her myriad limbs spread essential primordial constituents, but not those of standard creation myths, such as the four elements. Instead, she unfurled tapestries of interwoven spirits. Their forms fantastical and diverse. Their appendages, tongues, and hair braiding together to birth stars, nebulae, and galaxies.

To my considerable confusion, the paintings possessed one consistent eccentricity. Every drawing present was asymmetric. The arms of the creator, the projections of her power, and the assemblies of the entities in her weavings all appeared on her left side. At first, I assumed these lopsided murals were a product of decay. The depositions on one portion may have faded. However, I encountered one unbalanced illustration after the other. At times the right half was more intact than the other. The pattern was unmistakable. and

bewildering. Their portrayals of genesis accessed a bisected fraction of the canvas allotted.

Had I time, I would have analyzed this curious culture, sought to understand what themes and moralities such a mythology would undergird. My anxiety would not allow it. I pressed forward, narrowing the selection of possible routes as I memorized the maze. At last, I took one passageway leading to a true dead end. In my mental map, it was the last route in this subspace of the labyrinth from the initial left turn.

I had come through hundreds of paintings. I had learned an odd creation myth. As a reward, this section ended with another proverb sliced in stone. It too was in ancient Xixian. No doubt the product of the scrambled and reformed textual magic I had witnessed before. A purpose haunted this space beyond a simple puzzle.

Whatever is of a nature to arise,
is thereby of a quality to cease.

Whereas the first text had read ironic, this sentence brought on some apprehension. Was it simply an encapsulation of mortality? Millions of similar texts existed across the galaxy. Diverse species have struggled with concepts of death. I had lived over four hundred years, half the average Xixian lifespan. It was not uncommon for those of my age to begin extended, sober contemplations of our fate. Was this an adage for the foresighted?

Or was its meaning less profound and far more immediate? A warning for the fools who entered the labyrinth, who had dared challenge the designer? Was time limited in some way that implied an approaching threat to my being?

I could have continued a long, neurotic analysis, parsing the text and finding a thousand possible applications to my current predicament. Danger or not, my own impatience pressed me faster than any fear could restrain me. I turned my back on the inscription and retraced my path to the primary branch point.

This time, I went right.

What I experienced in this portion of the maze was similar, if a dramatic variation on a deeper theme. Again, the bafflement of passages. Again, the corroded artwork of a cult that had long ago passed away. Again, my journey would end at an impassable wall with a message. One morphed into coherency for my consumption.

I had anticipated the ancient artists would offer an opposite-handed exclusivity, one to reflect this opposing direction I had chosen. Instead, an identical left-right asymmetry was present. Everything depicted occurred on the same side of a majestic deity. The contrast lay in the nature of the two divinities portrayed.

The previous portion of the maze contained stories of a nurturing mother goddess. This section presented a ravaging destroyer. Congealed from a thousand angry spirits, a demon took shape in this cosmogenesis. It spent its infinite supply of time tearing through worlds and galaxies. The fiend devoured bodies and souls, beauty and love, laying waste to an entire cosmos. Ultimately, everything froze in a timeless winter, the god as well. It was an extraordinary mythological duality. The terse words etched into the wall at the end of this portion did little to dispel this interpretation.

Yes and No birth Mu.

Ancient Xixian writing speaking Zen Buddhist philosophies. *Who were these creatures?* Could they have been human? Such divergence in the art and architecture suggested a disparate subspecies. It might have been a group of humans and nonhumans who had lived together extended periods. The cohabitation influencing their respective cultures. Again, I could have continued to speculate. In another reality I would have enjoyed doing so. My need to resolve this test and exit the maze overpowered my curiosity.

Humbled by my failures in outsmarting the designer of this labyrinth, I retraced my steps. I suspected the ultimate purpose was not solving the puzzle, however, but the journey. The architect

imposed an education in images and words regardless of my choices. I returned to the entrance point and selected the forward path.

It was the most devious of the three. I spent hours trudging, backtracking, looping, and fighting a growing frustration. I tired of memorizing the confounding corridors. I fought a deepening physical and mental fatigue. The greatest exhaustion came from analyzing the ancient artwork. The final, and presumably key, graphical catechism from the earnest cult artists.

I struggled. What tried my patience was the disappointing predictability. All this effort! After presenting so many bizarre mythological cogitations, they settled on a messiah construct. Another savior story took shape in the drawings. They plastered its particularities across the maddening walls of the labyrinth.

At least they had spun a unique remix of the redeemer narratives. The imaginative, and likely sexually repressed, mythologizers presented a tale of romantic redemption. The narrative broke the mysterious devotion to left and right asymmetry. Along the forward direction were murals depicting a more symmetric universe. In the center of the paintings, the mother goddess and demon battled in a titanic conflict.

A glowing figure arose from nothingness. The savior stormed toward the clashing titans. It did not engage in battle with the fiend as might be anticipated. Instead, the redeemer threw the monster to the side and *mated* with the deity. An act, it would appear from the degraded artwork, destroying them both.

The devil rose, gazing on the cosmos in hunger. From the ashes and smoke of the ruined gods, an offspring of their consummation was incarnate. The god-child *devoured* the nemesis in one cosmic-sized bite. The last images show this new divine expanding to cover the wall.

I am sorry to say I did not examine the last illustrations with significant attention. As I gazed at these final compositions in wonder, a glow grew in front of me. Pushing my intellectual curiosity to the side, I rushed down the passageway after this radi-

ance. My momentum thrust me through a second archway of the labyrinth and into a vast open space.

The giant relief of Ambra overpowered the entire expanse of my vision, sickening me with strange vertigo. Following the sculpture downward, my eyes fell on the mountain of stairs below it. From my glimpses at the peak of the pillar, I knew these steps rose toward the carving and ended at an expansive plateau. I could not see the top from this perspective. The stairway appeared to ascend without end.

To my left and right, the outer wall of the maze ran until it crashed and fused with the sides of the cavern. Behind me was the labyrinth. There was no other direction to follow but upward. I moved forward and readied to climb.

Each stair of this massive ascent measured over a meter in height. It was perfect for a Xix but impractical for a human being. Yet it was not the design of the stairs that brought the customized nature of this place to my awareness. It was the lines carved into the face of the first step.

A final phrase, letters prepared specifically for me. Words asking a mystifying question.

Where are the anti-gods, Waythrel?

Chapter 40

What must I do? I see nothing but obscurities on every side.

Blaise Pascal

My name.

The transmutation of texts into Xixian languages should have prepared me, but the use of my name still shocked. This remarkable shrine was tens to hundreds of thousands of years old. Personalization unsettled me.

The dangling monoliths of Ambra's form suggested explanations. We had created something transformative on New Earth. The product had grown into a phenomenon for which a placement in time and space had lost a standard meaning. Spacetime shaken and stirred. I did not know *when* I was now——it could be in some far future or deep past. Had Ambra and her legion of souls constructed this place anticipating my arrival? All seemed possible. Believable.

Those were abstract thoughts. Seeing my own name etched into the rock required recovery. I fought to collect myself and continue.

Where are the anti-gods, Waythrel?

The words reverberated in my mind, but I pushed them aside and climbed the stairway. One hundred meters later, I pulled over the final step in exhaustion. Before me was a floor of gray stone, polished like marble. Ahead was a table, too small to have been visible from my perch when I arrived. A solid block of alabaster, it appeared more like an altar than anything else.

It was not empty.

Lying across its length was a human body draped in beige robes. Her porcelain skin shone in the ethereal light of the cavern. Sparse clumps of orange hair drooped to the slab surface. The deformed skull exhibited a familiar intricacy of instrumentation. The figure was a child, a girl, fast asleep.

"Kloan!" I cried, rushing forward.

I did not get far. Within several meters of the white plinth, I could not progress. A primitive defense field causes sudden physical reactions. The barrier separating us was more sophisticated. Numerous attempts to breach it failed. I concluded it worked on my nervous system, robbing me of any ability to move or act. Whatever the cause, every time I tried to approach beyond a certain point, I was standing still.

"Kloan!"

She did not wake or show any signs of disturbance.

"Ambra!" I pleaded to the lunging goddess above. "It must end. We have had enough. Let us out!"

I moved to pound on the invisible barrier in my frustration. My listless arms hung at my sides.

I sat on the cold floor, despairing and rattled. Minutes, hours. The flow of time slipped through my awareness. Only the incessant echo of dripping water testified to the passage of each moment. I was bereft of ideas and empty of energy to continue.

What was the purpose? A separation, riddles and mazes. Bizarre and unfathomable mythologies. A reunion dangled before me and snatched away. To teach me something? My suspicion, but I had

learned nothing from the ridiculous paintings or the obscure koans in stone.

How was I to know what was expected? What required? I flailed a few steps from her I sought. A reward withheld from a nymph who had not yet absorbed her lesson——how was I to pass this test and open the prison?

Where are the anti-gods, Waythrel?

The unbidden words forced me to concentrate. Of everything I had seen, of all I had read in this mystifying place, there had been a single question. At the last, there had indeed been a riddle demanding from me an answer. It was amazing I understood so late.

Where are the anti-gods?

I went deep into myself. All my focus, intellect, and Reader senses focused on this query.

Where are the anti-gods? *Anti* must refer to our enemies, those creatures of material inversion. What about *anti-gods*? Was this asking about the religion of the Anti?

I strained to recall the vicious time loops carrying us through the clone colony. The indoctrinations. The strange philosophies. The Anti possessed a cosmology and belief system. But gods? I searched my memory. I had come across no words, no artwork, no evidence of any kind suggesting the Anti worshipped deities. Of course, a secular culture was not uncommon in the galaxy. Such societies tended to outnumber the religious. However, every sentient species developed first through a more irrational period preceding the flowering of a scientific skepticism.

The Great God perished before the Nous could be. All remaining was the dust of destruction, a single theme devoid of counterpoint. But in this powder lay a seed. Of the ice, there lingered frost. Of the day, there remained a star beam. And of love, there endured hope.

The memory from the indoctrination sessions flowed through my mind. The Anti had myths. Their anti-gods? Destroyed! Erased in a cosmic catastrophe. A perfect reflection of their minority role in the universe.

I stood and shouted.

"There are no anti-gods because the creation story is about their destruction."

I paused to allow my words to reach whatever was monitoring this madness. After some time, I stepped toward Kloan. I got nowhere.

"Ambra, please! This answer is correct!"

Accurate or not, it was not the response the goddess sought. I examined my assumptions and attempted to dig deeper into this conundrum.

Where are the anti-gods, Waythrel?

On the surface, the question almost seemed literal. At this stage of our infernal quest, I indeed accepted the existence of gods. Not in the supernatural sense, but the monstrously natural. The Synphel abomination. The divergent incarnations of the Daughter. Creatures, beings, syntheses of the elements of this universe. Deities obeying the physical laws inherent therein. Yet so advanced, so mighty that *gods* was the one word appropriate for them. I had experienced them. I had tasted of their power, love, and transcendent animosity.

It was my scientific naturalism that guided me toward a solution. I presumed the gods we encountered were products of the material building blocks we knew to exist. However, the presence of the Anti proved how biased my view of reality was. If gods of matter existed, why shouldn't there be gods of antimatter? If so, *where were they?* The Anti had known of the *devil ball* for eons. Why had they never developed or mentioned or sought out their own anti-gods?

An obvious hypothesis arose. Like the Anti themselves, their gods were few. I had encountered two transcendent entities in our travels. One that I helped create had embroiled me in a cosmic quest attracting the other. Hardly a dataset on which to build a model. Still, it seemed such assemblies, these gods, were uncommon. As a general principle, the number of large compositions is small relative

to their constituent parts. This explained why there were so few divinities.

And the building blocks of matter outnumbered those of its inverse by orders of magnitude.

That was it!

Understanding dawned. No anti-gods existed for the simple reason that *they could not assemble*. The Orb is a construction of beyond quintillions of souls. An ocean of components bordering on uncountable. How much antimatter was there in the universe? Relatively, the total might as well be zero.

What quantity could remain isolated from its antithesis long enough to develop star systems? Life and intelligence? How many such species would survive their wild adolescence to achieve stability? Of these, what number of minds remained for a collective? One able to mature into a being like those I had encountered?

The more I considered it, the more unlikely it became. The deities of the Anti had indeed perished in the creation. Genesis had wiped out the material from which their divinities could be fashioned. Our universe lacked the raw elements to construct anti-sentience at that level.

Something about this realization disturbed me, but I did not stop to ponder any more. I had the answer. This time I was sure of it.

"There are no anti-gods, Ambra. There never were and never will be. They cannot exist, because there isn't enough antimatter to support them."

With the last echo of my words, a tonal chord rang across the underground chamber. Composed of multiple harmonic frequencies, it spanned the infrabass to a shattering ultrasonic. The air rattled in front of me. I took this as a sign and stepped toward Kloan.

This time I reached her.

Chapter 41

We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories, one after another, to account for its origins. At last, we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And lo! It is our own.

Arthur Stanley Eddington

I reached the gleaming altar, and she opened her eyes.

"Waythrel?"

She was alert. Her body showed no signs of the sluggishness of prolonged sleep, drugs, or neuro-fields. It was as if she had been suspended in time and restored to the temporal flow.

"Where am I?"

I grasped her hands. "Kloan, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

She leaned up, passing her fingers over the slick surface of the slab in confusion and interest. Her eyes swept across the enormous stairway and maze. They settled on the pendulous goddess relief over us.

"Holy shit."

Joy flowed through me. "Then you are unharmed?"

She whistled while squinting at the sculpture above us, returning attention to her body. "Two legs, two arms, two feet, proper digits. A head. No blood. No new scars. No memories. You tell me." She gestured to the vast chamber. "What is this place? What are we doing here? And why do you look like you've run around that lunatic maze down there fifty times?"

"Because I have," I said, eliciting a single eyebrow raise. "It is an exhausting story. We were divided. I was half a kilometer away over there. I came through the labyrinth. I had to absorb a message and answer a riddle, or we could never leave." I recounted the narrative as she sat raptly before me on the stone structure.

"I want to see the question," she said, hopping off the edge of the altar. "Might need some Xixian handholding to get down these stairs, though."

With my help, she descended the stairway on foot, although she could have floated down with ease. One hundred hops later, we reached the bottom.

Kloan studied the inscription, a joyous light on her face. "Your own private test of doom," she said, tracing the letters with her finger. "I'll have to trust you on the meaning. I can't read a bit of it."

"What I do not understand is why," I said.

"Why what?" she asked, spinning in place and taking in the grandeur of the cavern.

"All of this. Why were we brought here?"

"You said it yourself—to learn a lesson. I think you have."

"This is an awful lot of trouble to get me to think about something."

"Sometimes living a question answers it better than thinking. Our brains too often get in the way of thought. These repetitions trapping us are designed to impress learning into us. So we have more than facts in our minds. We *change*. Data we need to assimilate to take the next step, and, finally, to exit the loop."

"Is it possible?" I asked. "Will we ever escape it?"

"*Ever* and *possible* both lose their meaning in all this, don't you think? We'll never get there even if we do, and it seems *all* possibilities are sampled in the summation."

"More Kloan-babble I cannot follow," I said, but held her hand. "At least I should be able to understand this one. It focused on *me*. Lessons for me. Motivations sure to drive me to reach within for answers."

"Is it love, my Xixy pixie?" she asked, glancing at our clasped appendages. "Are you ready to confess to me your true feelings?"

I ignored her. "So I deduced a solution to a riddle, and satisfied the goddess, or whoever is behind this. To answer what question? One obsessed with the metaphysics of antimatter gods! Of what possible point is all this effort for such esoterica?"

"Physics is esoteric, but without it, the universe ceases to be."

"*My* knowing nature's laws has no impact on whether the cosmos will exist. Neither will my understanding the hypothetical inverse divinities."

Her face fell. She focused her bright eyes on my clusters. "Are you so certain, Waythrel?"

My eyestalks buzzed. "Of course. How can what I understand about the creation be of any deep significance to reality itself?"

Kloan turned away. "A broken continuum is mighty unpredictable."

The child was irrepressibly disconcerting.

I soldiered on. "Which brings us back to this granite extravagance. What is the point? Why are we here? What could she be up to? It does not make sense."

"Ha! Well, one thing's for sure. Ambra moves in mysterious ways." She pointed above. "Whatever her motives, I don't think we'll have time to consider them anymore in this place."

A bright light grew from the ceiling, dazzling and forcing me to avert my eyestalks. It extended tendrils of radiance toward us. Long tentacles launched about our forms as if searching for prey.

"Time's up," said Kloan, her eyes cast down to the deep shadows on the rock.

The luminous limbs pulled us off the ground and to the blinding source overhead. My last memory was of her voice echoing in a maelstrom of sound and brilliance.

"See you again soon, Waythrel!"

Chapter 42

I have seen beyond the bounds of infinity and drawn down daemons from the stars. I have harnessed the shadows that stride from world to world to sow death and madness.

H. P. Lovecraft

Morning. The warm light of a star I did not know yet had seen one million times. My awareness lacked a concept of time. No history with permanence. No trustworthy memories. I fell forever into dreamscapes, one after the other, without hope of waking.

Out of breath (in my own Xixian manner), I rested several meters from the gleaming portal. We must have climbed. Flushed, Kloan sweated from exertion. I recalled a cave—mazes and riddles and brilliance. I did not remember climbing or how we got here.

The gate, I remembered. Its parameters were intimate from infinite expeditions through this spacetime anomaly. An Orb slice mixing a viscous honeyed surface. One waiting for our submersion to

cast us through existential dreams. Its horrible beauty tugged as I gawked at the profound ocean of stars within.

"Something's wrong," said the clone.

My gaze centered on the starry ring, but several eyes darted to the cyborg. She was taut, as straight as a light beam. Her eyes swept the space between us and the disk, vigilant as prey before a predator.

The atmosphere undulated. The landscape glitched and blurred. The air itself coagulated. I panicked as the amorphous ripples solidified, adopting form and hue. A multitude of arms, sixfold symmetry, and a patch of eyes springing from a conical torso.

"Hello again, Waythrel," it said.

Nightmares rampaged through my thoughts. Memories. Of what?

Do not imagine that this forgery deceived me. The imposter burned my Reader senses, radiating intense cognitive fields. Complex. Deep with a power I had sensed in the presence of the Ambra-Orb. However, the sentience mimicking my lover felt more malevolent than profound. Gazing at this version of my life mate unleashed a torrent of disturbing images. Anger, slaughter, pain, madness.

Kloan grasped my arm. "Don't let it in your mind," she whispered.

"Let it?" came the smooth voice of my beloved. The tones were perfect mimics, but alien. "If you have any perception, then you know nothing you can do can stop me."

"No, but *she* will!" I declared, shocking myself with this triumphant exclamation. A subconscious certitude spun my eyestalks behind us. I awaited the form of Ambra Dawn.

She did not arrive.

Kloan screamed and fell to her knees, grasping her head. She rocked back and forth, moaning, crying, tears pouring down her cheeks. Spit frothed from her mouth. Seizures shook her as she shivered and collapsed. Her eyes flipped back into their sockets. Alongside the frosted stone in her forehead were two white orbs. They

stared from a hideous mask of trembling torture. Blood trickled from her left nostril.

"Stop!" I cried. I dropped to the ground, grabbing her in my arms. Her jaw clenched, tearing her tongue and lips. I ripped a piece of clothing away from her robes and placed it between her teeth.

I did not dare imagine I could shield her mentally. This dark god overwhelmed my vision as a Reader. I had to shut it out as if closing my eyes. Still, I was blinded. What would an attempt at defense have achieved? Kloan was formidable beyond my imagining. This devil had tossed her like a toy flung by a toddler in a tantrum.

"As you wish," said the thing.

Kloan fell to the ground, unresponsive. I checked her vitals. She was alive, but unconscious. A quick mind probe indicated severe trauma without major physiological damage.

"We are not ready to destroy her yet," it said. "We need additional information."

"We? Are you one or many? Where are the others? What do you want?" I cradled Kloan's head in my arms.

"The legendary Waythrel of Xix cannot surmise?" The demon performed a Xixian body gesture that can be translated as a sarcastic smile. "Or did you think your crude experiment with Ambra Dawn was somehow unique in all the universe?"

A terrible dread settled on me. "What are you?"

"One of the other gods, of course."

"Rakshasi." How I knew the name confused me.

"She has spoken of me."

"You are a mental union? A group consciousness?"

"The best understanding your intellect can manage. The conservation of organizing principles is invariant throughout the continuum. Assemblies as rudimentary as your mind should grasp this. Strings dissect into smaller entities. The deconstruction plunges to levels to which your philosophies have never scurried. Time itself stumbles in this constituent maze. Such structures form bottomless foundations. Quarks to molecules, cells to tissues. Intelligence.

Cogent networks evolving toward celestial wanderers striding the cosmos like giants."

Images assaulted me. They ripped my soul from my creaturely perspective. Poisoned mockery impaled me on a momentary glimpse from the eyes of a divinity. Eons as instants, parsecs like small steps. A morality foreign and horrible oppressed me. My mind teetered on splintering.

"You are the atoms of our minds," the entity concluded. It slung my awareness back to the dirt and rock.

Disoriented, terrified, I shielded my eyes. "What do you want with us?"

"We search for what your creation-god is planning. We suspect her intentions are far from pure as they concern others of our kind."

"I do not understand."

"The Ambra-Orb. What does she wish with this creature?" it said, gesturing toward Kloan, who lay unmoving in my arms.

"Ambra-Orb?" My mind raced, feverish in the terrible presence of this thing. "Yes, wait, I remember. She is the Sphere."

"Haven't you managed to put this together? Or can your feeble intelligence not retain anything in this recursive playground of hers? Now tell us, what do you conclude is the point of this cyborg? Think through all you have encountered. You will not enter this gate until you have answered to our satisfaction."

"Why can't you read it from our thoughts?"

A hostile impatience radiated. It was like the glow of a furnace door opened in front of me. I could not shield myself from it. If one's consciousness could feel heat, mine was scalded.

"We have taken all your memories and impressions. We know all that has happened, and it is not enough. Her deviousness is deep beyond explaining. Her true purpose is encoded in your cognition. You must reason with us, think through her desires. Explain to us now what she wishes. What you understand about what has transpired. In the *deduction* is the answer."

"Why me? This clone understands far more. Yet you threaten her survival."

"She lacks a need of processing for this precise rationale." Synphel *smiled* again, and the horror of it on this creature sickened me. "You, however, do not comprehend much at all, but the puzzle pieces are all within your thoughts. You must try to assemble them."

I held the unresponsive child in my arms. I continued to pray Ambra would return and deliver us. But focusing on this hope was impossible. The monstrous presence before me forced engagement.

In a terrible panic, my mind raced. It was no longer my own. My cognitive processes transformed into buttons in the hands of a fiend. I dizzied trying to stitch together the blurred memories of time loops. Horrific nightmares. Death, pain, and carnage. Beautiful mysteries. Gentle, loving moments.

Thousands, millions of passages I had forgotten. This creature yanked them through my awareness. The god's pressure unearthed the ruins of my recall. It flooded me with events I could not access. My body swayed.

The plans of the Anti.

Yes, it was the unifying element to all the journeys. It was the one thing making sense.

I babbled. "This clone is playing out all the routes to the destruction of the Daughter. Ambra is encouraging it. Yet nothing ever happens. We circle back. The actions in the past have no lasting impact on her existence."

"Continue."

My air sacs clogged from stress secretions. My oxygen content lowered and fogged my thoughts. I concentrated harder. "Why would she encourage this? She fears the creature."

"And?"

"She looks in the failure of cause and effect for a vulnerability. The thread that makes this cyborg so unusual. Yes, I remember. She said all the gods dread her. Why?"

"There is a discontinuity. A place in an inaccessible singularity of space and time. She is the source. We are unable to read her."

"Ambra must fear her, too. She is either trapping her in this loop to forever keep her here, or to study her, or both. She is trying to prevent Kloan from doing something you all anticipate but cannot see."

The diabolical Synphel was gone. Vanished in a breath as I processed my thoughts. It left no trace behind. No hint this being spanning galaxies had displaced a molecule of the atmosphere.

Heat from the local star warmed my chilled skin. I uncovered my eyestalks, feeling like a nymph again, terrified of things I could not see, events unrealized except in the dim recesses of my darkest dreams.

Kloan lay wounded in my arms. She coughed roughly, gasping for air. Her eyes flew open, and she lurched to the ground, shivering.

I applied what medical training I had. Our long association with humans provided us a significant knowledge of their anatomy. Without proper instruments, I could not be sure, but it seemed the trauma had not damaged her body.

Her mind was another issue.

"I've seen the true abyss," she whispered, staring into space. "It's been infused into me. I didn't know. Never *imagined*. Such impossible horror—I don't want to live. But death! Immortality and hell. Waythrel, please, can we *unexist?*"

"Kloan—"

"I've smelled it." Tendrils of saliva clung like webs between her gnashing teeth. "Its foul taste flooded my mouth and nostrils. A vile sludge suffocating me in stench and slime." She closed her eyes and cried to the sky. "I heard the groan and weeping of entire galaxies in the void." Her body convulsed in my arms.

I tried to comfort her. "Shock. Violence to your mind. It is not real. You are safe. We both are, now." I did not believe my own words.

She turned wide eyes to me. Her hands grasped my appendages,

pulling the twelve fingers of each to her lips. She kissed them, one by one. Her thoughts reached toward mine, a need for contact with something decent, a being with affection. Even a monster.

"You don't understand, dear Waythrel. I've seen what you have not, what a Xix could never see and survive. There is no forgetting. No more peace or love. No more safety." Tears streamed down her face.

"And no more Kloan."

She bowed her head into her lap, whispering. "I traveled. To the place of demons. They are *real*. They are lurking between the shadows of the stars. And they are *waiting*."

"For what?" I asked, a primal chill firing through my form.

"For all of us...and the dying of the light."

Chapter 43

I perceived that I was on a little round grain of rock and metal, filmed with water and with air, whirling in sunlight and darkness. On the skin of that little grain all the swarms of men, generation by generation, had lived in labour and blindness, with intermittent joy and intermittent lucidity of spirit. All their history, with its folk-wanderings, its empires, its philosophies, its proud sciences, its social revolutions, its increasing hunger for community, was but a flicker in one day of the lives of the stars.

Olaf Stapledon

"What do we do now, Kloan?"

Bewildered, I struggled for direction. She showed no sign of interest in the journey we had been moments from undertaking. The child crumpled on the ground next to me, her chin heavy on her knees. Her eyes stared across a million light-years.

To what, I dared not ask. I feared probing would break her fragile

psyche. After the things she had said, I also questioned the wisdom of knowing.

I rested beside her in silence as the afternoon wore on. A portion of me worried about the forces below. Would they discover us? Discovery meant certain capture and probable death given Kloan's dysfunction.

Increasingly, my thoughts and focus drifted. After the encounters of the last few hours, everything else receded, small and feeble. My mind visualized planets. They teemed with sentient creatures stumbling about their daily routines. Their actions accelerated. Years shrank to microseconds. Generations passed, entire cultures rose and fell, world civilizations matured and perished. Yet all of it, the sum across a galaxy of stars, inconsequential. Transient vanity.

I had not seen the full horror forced upon Kloan, but for a short moment, I had glimpsed through the eyes of a demon. Its titanic perspective reduced me to a mote. A shattering vastness rendered our lives to femtoseconds. Our evanescent chemical dances were humbled beside a timeless awareness.

I grasped her despair. What possible significance could the pair of us have? What madness was it to believe ephemeral molecules had meaning in this colossal cosmic ocean? I had experienced the presence of a deity. I could no longer sense my self.

"Waythrel."

My eyestalks darted behind me, filling my vision with images generating fear. Standing still and tranquil, in dark yet phosphorescent beauty, was Synphel once more. My emotions ran a sickening gamut. Terror, love, longing, disgust, desire, and elation. I rotated my body to the thing, my limbs trembling.

"Please. No more. Do not torture us anymore. If there is pity in the gods the universe has created, leave us in peace. We are dust."

"Waythrel, it is I. Open your heart."

The rush of affection and concern sweeping through me was overpowering. Gone was the malignancy of consciousness I had endured from the demon. Instead, I drank the unmistakable presence

of my long-separated mate. A loving personality poured through my Reader senses. A healing aura radiated, absent from the hellish apparition.

Forgive me for using the clumsiness of your language to bimodally gender her. *Her* is the pronoun I will use, although it warps the nature of any of our six genders. But your word *it* distorts her character to a greater degree, erasing all aspects of sexual differentiation.

In this meeting with my lover, the intimacy of the encounter I choose to relate, cries out for something better. For on this day, we were not two *its.* A poor approximation is that we were two *hers.* The love between us acted as a balm to the wounds the monstrosities had inflicted on Kloan and me.

"*Synphel*." My eyes danced while maintaining focus on her. "How? You are part of the Group Mind. With Ambra. How are you here?"

"We have become something beyond what you can conceptualize. I am clothed in atoms and molecules, stitched in flesh, incarnate here to meet with you."

"Your consciousness?"

"All of Synphel is assembled from the dust and debris of this world. We are not alone yet none of our host is truly here."

I struggled to understand her words. I imagined a mental projection. The equivalent of a complex transform arriving at this point of space and time. It possessed the power from afar to manipulate matter magically. To construct a completed organism from the inanimate particles on a distant planet. Not a random form, but a precise replica of my lifemate.

I was slow to learn this lesson. I had witnessed the reality in the face-off between the demon and Ambra. I had to witness it in repetition to absorb the depth of the implications. I could not doubt. They were—or had become, or would be—gods.

Her voice spoke in my mind.

Divinities to you, yet you are one of our makers, Waythrel. Is this

not itself a miracle? We are still composed of the elements of this cosmos. We do not transcend it, although we pursue transcendence. Indeed, that is what all this is about.

She turned the bulk of her eyestalks to gaze beside me. "Kloan, please come here."

In my dread and wonder in this reunion, I had neglected the child. She stirred and rose, facing my partner. Torment haunted her eyes.

Synphel approached the girl. "They seek to strip you of the energies to carry out your quest. To freeze you in place, suspended and defused," she said. "If they understood, they would destroy you. Their hesitancy reflects the terrible potential in you they intuit. All timelines become discontinuous in your presence. A phenomenon unique in all the continuum to you. You are the nexus in all that is and all that was and will be."

"I am broken."

"As is our cosmos. Neither beyond healing."

Synphel placed her upper hands to Kloan's face, surrounding her head with twenty-four fingertips. The dark black of my lover's skin contrasted with the white of the clone. The soft, lipid-insulated hominid clashed with the elongated, leathery appendages of a Xix.

Kloan closed her eyes and wept.

"Yes, remember the dreams. Find the resolution to the asymmetry. Accept again the calling. Let it shine and char to ash the torment you have seen."

The cyborg wrapped her arms around Synphel and shook with sobs.

I had studied the development of human infants and children. Proper brain maturation depended on nurturing physical contact. The girl embraced a nightmare of limbs and eyes. The instinct overcame discomfort as the child purged the emotional poison.

After several minutes, Kloan relaxed, and she stepped backward, wiping her eyes and face. "Thank you," she said, peering into my lover's eyestalks. "Thank you, all."

"The horror will never leave you," said Synphel. "But it will no longer overthrow your mind. Follow your meditations. Take your pain and scars and use them to grow."

Relief spread through me. This cyborg had abducted me. Committed atrocities in my presence. Befuddled and frightened me on innumerable occasions. Yet I rejoiced. My Xixian nature. Our desire for healing that often damaged more than it helped.

With Kloan, it was much more than such a generic response. She elicited from me many of my feelings for her progenitor. Although so different from Ambra, I could not help but love her.

Synphel's eyestalks divided between us. "Now you must regroup and continue your journey."

Chapter 44

Nature does not dictate dualities, trinities, quarterings, or any "objective" basis for human taxonomies; most of our chosen schemes, and our designated numbers of categories, record human choices from a cornucopia of possibilities offered by natural variation from place to place, and permitted by the flexibility of our mental capacities.

Stephen Jay Gould

A spasm of desperation swept through me.

"Synphel, please. Don't go." Surprising myself, I stepped forward and entwined my fingers with hers. "I cannot keep you. I know this. You are a memory made flesh. But I am unable to let you go." Her digits twirled around my own. The foolishness of my yearning mocked me. "So real. This fantasy I touch is precious beyond words to me."

"Have you ever loved a goddess, Waythrel?"

She pressed her form alongside my own. The skin cilia of our compatible mating types locked and engaged. The biological program sent shivers through me. Without conscious decision, my

eyestalks probed and found hers. Each wrapped about the other. Eighteen sighted organs formed a complex braid staring at the others.

I did not care that I would mate with an avatar sculpted out of the sands of this distant planet. I cared little that the Xix I knew was gone, altered and absorbed into a godlike entity full of countless personalities. It mattered not that those trillions observed. In love, disinterest, and emotions unfathomable. They partook of this moment of our deepest intimacy.

No, I only wished to merge with her one last time.

It is difficult to explain the oddities of our physiology to you of Earth. All sexual species mingle a hereditary substance. Our reproductive combination comprises six sexes with separate gametes containing fractions of what you would call the Xixian genome. Our mating pair was an integral element in the whole.

There is no point in explaining how our genotype could be stable. No space in this story for the complexities and nonlinearity of group evolution. No time to define what constitutes an organism under selection. What matters is we formed the core structure on which the procreating ensemble assembled.

Our bond had to be deep, strong, and durable. Our sexual encounters, the longest of our copulative pairings, were therefore very much unlike your own brief moments. Many pair mates of our type entered into lifetime unions outside the reproductive set.

Our lovemaking began in mutual penetration with a hidden appendage. To you a strange variant of a tentacle, it thrust through a slit in our torso and hunted the equivalent organ in our mate. Perhaps in analogy to your male's erections, this process initiated arousal.

These tentacles were not injection devices working alone. They sought the other. Each wrapped around its counterpart like an Earth vine. Or closer still, the entwining eyestalks above our torsos. The effect on our physiology parallels the stimulation of your genital nerve webs.

This god-Synphel drove me to a growing ecstasy of fusion. Our

reproductive arms touched, caressed, and enveloped their corresponding limbs. They pressed forward in opposite directions. Body temperature spiked as they found the opening slit, teasing it mercilessly. The appendages plunged inward toward the deep neuronal nexus buried within.

Here is the element of our dance that is the hardest to explain. The tip of the penetrating member resembles an ovate leaflet of your plants. Thousands of microbristles decorate its exterior, each pregnant with nerve-like protrusions. The extremity from Synphel penetrated my core. My mind flooded with pleasure as it wrapped around my sexual cluster. The leaf dug into the most sensitive portion. My own performed the same action to her, and our forms linked in a commanding embrace.

From our sides and backs, additional tentacles extended. These swiveled, probing for the other sexes of our mating group. They would sway until the lack of engagement quenched our copulation.

It would take some time. As the foundational element, the interweaving of our bodies was a platform for the other members. Our desire to continue was enormous. We writhed in the torment of reproductive pleasure for more than an hour.

I connected to the consciousness of Synphel through nerve clusters and Reader senses. Reflecting my previous experiences, this encounter convinced me of her true presence.

A depth revealed itself. She was more. Altered—layered and more alien. The host swirled beneath the surface of her mind. Their personalities flitted here and there across my awareness. Buried in the core of this endless mentality, I sensed Ambra. Her emotions and thoughts poured over me. They created images in my cognizance, and I dreamed she smiled.

Our physiological program ran its course. The external appendages withdrew, having failed to find their mating structures. Our bodies cooled. The tentacles inside turned uncomfortable as the pleasure dissipated. They released the drained nerve clusters and slithered out. Coiling like snakes, they returned to their own origin deep

within. At the last, our eyestalks unwound. We separated, continuing to align each visual organ.

"Thank you," I said.

"I have missed you terribly," said Synphel.

Kloan walked beside us. "It was gorgeous," she said, her once-harrowed face bright. "And strange. Disturbing. Beyond beautiful. I saw oceans of them, spinning like ghosts in and out of space. A cosmos of minds."

My lover stepped toward the disk. "The third element of this visit is also completed. We had to know you would love the child, and so you have. Now begins a new cycle."

The burden of our imprisonment weighed me down.

"Where will it take us now? Have we learned what we needed to learn?" I had no idea what was expected.

She did not answer but gestured to the gateway. The whirling celestial field scrambled. Rainbows embedded in the depths flickered and trembled.

"We will not meet again in this cosmos, my dearest Waythrel," said my lover. "Still, you will not be left without me."

Synphel vanished. No sound, no rushing of air or displacement occurred. Absence alone.

The child clone and I stood together. In front blazed an incredible window to another space, other times. Behind us the radiance cast shadows in the bright light of the local star.

"We aren't alone, leaky thoughts," said Kloan, smiling. "I can feel them watching. Can you?"

I tested my Reader senses. It was faint. An echo of my mate and Ambra. Their cosmic mental ecosystem undulated in a gaggle of gravitons. Real or wishful thinking, it was comforting.

I strained, detecting other currents, other minds lurking in the depths of the churning continuum. The comfort wavered. I was a swimmer in a cold sea, lingering in a warmer current. Around us an icy, unfathomable deep lay concealed. Monsters meditated in the abyss.

"Perhaps it was better to be alone," I said, shivering.

"When there is hate, there's love," said Kloan. "Fire and ice, order and disorder, creation and destruction. Where there's Ambra, there is also me."

My eyestalks centered on her brooding features, not knowing what to think of these words. I still did not comprehend the purposes of this infinite journey. But whatever it had been—it had shifted. In taking the next steps, I was putting my trust in both the yes and the no, in the odd opposites of the two forms of the Daughter.

"The thing tore open my mind, Kloan. The journeys. The multitudes—I am remembering hordes. It's too much."

She grasped my arm. "You weren't the only one tested, Waythrel. It'll be different each time, and only when we've fully understood will we see the answer."

She glanced behind us and laughed. Following her gaze, I glimpsed two forms scaling the rocky terraces below. A redheaded clone and her towering companion.

"Seems we'll always be dancing together, Xix."

We turned back to the disk. Hand in hand, we stepped forward, the portal gel enveloping us like molasses.

We fell to a deep darkness.

Part VI

The words of wonder I watched elders weave,
the tales of Truth more strange than in my dreams:
Of ghosts so small they pass through vision's sieve
yet stitch my mind in fragile, fleshy seams.

Or hungry gods, enormous, ever starved,
who take all prey to planes beyond our own,
where time and space are infinitely carved
into a fabric rent and never sown.

To groups so gifted by the gods, the signs
and studied charms the elder priests unfold.
The depths await our readied, seeking minds.
As Shaman I may find new Truths untold.

Yet some nights I feel depths beyond our Way,
and what I am the spirits do not say.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 45

Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of Nature. It is because in the last analysis we ourselves are part of the mystery we are trying to solve.

Max Planck

Darkness.

A terrible blackness beyond anything I had experienced. Along with it, a chill. The surrounding space leached the warmth from my form.

A vigorous shake of my upper arm startled me.

It was Kloan, or so I surmised from her thermal shape in this total caliginosity. Her body pressed against mine. She shivered. I strained with all my senses. No smells or taste through my skin sacs. I felt nothing but the cyborg. My eighteen visual organs were useless. Zero radiation in any frequency range. Not even infrared. A perilous freeze surrounded us.

Wherever we are, came her thoughts, *we stand on something. Something's underneath.*

She was correct. I tried to speak to acknowledge her observation. The translator remained silent.

The translator!

Of course. What stupor poisoned my thinking? I was slow to adapt to these shocking dislocations in space and time.

I fiddled with the device around my neck. It emitted a pale glow blinding my eyes in this ultimate night. Adjusting, I examined our immediate environment. It was bleaker than I could have imagined.

At our feet was a pile of white dust, arranged about us. The solidified gate gel, I judged from its absence from our forms. I assumed the material had chilled and shattered into this fine powder, but I could not be sure. For the ten meters the light illuminated, I saw ice and rock. The appearance varied, ranging from frosted to clear. On top, a blue film coated all surfaces, stone and crystal. I had seen nothing like it before. It was the same in all directions. My mind raced.

What do you think this is, Waythrel? I can't read anything. It's all dark.

It was the first time Kloan had turned to me in ignorance. In our wild and disorienting journeys, the child held the advantage in all things. In this wasteland, she sounded small, lost, and searching for a parental figure, even a six-limbed alien. Rather than stoke my ego, it brought on a sense of dread. Of all the disturbing powers I had witnessed in the universe, if she was so unsure, our danger was acute.

I don't know.

You suspect. Your thoughts bubble.

I took a step. The foot slid in the frozen glaze. Moving was treacherous and required intense caution to avoid excess momentum.

She probed further. *Could it be underground? There's no light.*

Possible.

You don't think so.

There is no atmosphere, Kloan. No sound from my translator. No noise from our steps. We are in a total vacuum. The temperature

outside is close to absolute zero. I assume your skin suits are keeping us alive. I do not know how long they will last.

Waythrel, they aren't mine!

I found comfort in the reminder. We were beyond our capacities, preserved by some mysterious technology provided by the same Being transporting us here. However perilous this location, I trusted in our benevolent deity.

I positioned my eyestalks, taking a spherical view.

There are no stars overhead, yet no atmosphere or light pollution to drown them out. Where are the heavens?

That's why I say underground.

Let's try to cover some ground and see what else we can find. Something will help us understand.

Data. She grinned.

Yes, some information. Our survival may depend on it.

She frowned, the glow of the translator and darkness behind chiseling her features.

All the knowledge is important to our lives, Waythrel. To the cosmos.

We should focus on the rock and ice here and worry about the universe later.

She said nothing. We slipped forward, able to see a few meters ahead of us. It was enough to avoid a pit or cliff or other danger, but it allowed us no broad view of our environment. We had little sense of the lay of the land, zero points of reference, and no navigation tools besides memory. Journeying was an act of delusional optimism.

Stones and frost. On it went. Minutes passed. Hours. Kloan continued to shiver, but the suit prevented harm. She showed no signs of hypothermia or frostbite, but I monitored her.

More glazed gravel. A giant's toy in a mineral collection, sprayed with a fixative to protect the surface from scratches. I checked the translator. The power supply would last months. The diodes illuminating our path were a greater unknown. I hoped to get several days of continuous use.

Waythrel, careful. The land is sloping down.

The child was correct. We worked harder to avoid skating on the frictionless ground. The terrain smoothed, the larger rocks giving way to pebbles and a strange sand. The thick layer of ice still coated all surfaces, specimens in a box separated from probing hands by a sheet of glass.

Kloan, can you determine nothing of this place from your searches into the past?

She shook her head.

This world's history—it never ends. It's an infinite, unchanging well. I can't look at it anymore. I fall, and always the same, this darkness and cold. It's like it has been this way forever. A frozen, dead eternity.

I mulled her ominous words. We had come to an environment unlike any we had explored, where our knowledge and powers proved useless. I focused on what we did know to quell the growing panic. If I understood anything, it was that Ambra had sent us here. The godball had arranged it. This included, I assumed, the suits that preserved two living organisms in this icy vacuum.

There had to be a purpose. We had to learn whatever the gods desired us to know. After which we would find ourselves dizzy and confused, back where we started.

The time loops have destabilized, Waythrel. I told you things changed last time. Extreme powers have entered the game.

One we cannot stop playing.

Not yet.

Is there nothing you saw in your searches? Nothing of use?

Kloan wrapped her arms around her chest shivering.

I had to look away. Too deep. A hope, maybe. Something in the distance.

We stood on a plain of some kind. If this were an underground cavern, it was enormous beyond comprehension. No dome could support the span. I grew convinced we were not entombed within

the bowels of some planet. Where we were still eluded any confident model.

Waythrel, wait. Turn off the translator.

Why?

Please, just do it. There is *something ahead. Far away, I think.*

We need the light to see it.

No, not this. It's glowing itself. Your necklace is blinding us. Shut it off and let our eyes adjust.

I did as she asked. The gleam of the device dimmed. Darkness rushed in as some visceral thing, a tidal mist with a malevolent will of its own. I had never been in the presence of such a complete lack of radiant sources, utter blackness. It stirred primitive and unreasonable instincts. It seemed alive.

She was right. The ink enveloping us could not solidify. Far ahead, a languid light spilled from a beacon. The glow resisted the smothering obsidian, culling its imposition over space, an energy above the absolute zero of the landscape. *Potential* pulsed, a hope to battle the inevitability of thermodynamics. A chance of life.

I guess we go that way, Kloan?

She was already walking.

Chapter 46

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.

H. P. Lovecraft

We walked for strenuous hours, the distances deceptive. The beacon ahead provided the sole reference in this icebound desert. The radiance intensified. With our eyes long adjusted to the paltry illumination of the translator, we were better able to discern our own shapes. Regardless, the contents of the murky spaces beyond us remained hidden. A threatening unknown toyed with my imagination.

Exhausted, chilled, we dragged ourselves forward. Kloan's breaths exited the force field, solidifying. They drifted to the ground as a soft snow. My gaseous exchange was similar, although spread over the surface area of my skin. It produced no such dramatic display. I had no idea where we received the input atmosphere to breathe or the warmth that kept us from freezing. I noticed her

fingers had begun to turn white. Whatever the capabilities of the skins encasing us, they were finite. I hoped it would be enough for the time we would spend in this ice hell.

The light grew. Shadows formed behind us—and, to my amazement, in front of us as well. Focusing the power of all my eyes, I perceived blurred silhouettes near the beacon.

Can you see those shapes? They must be large.

She nodded. *Before I stopped looking into the past of this frozen nightmare, they passed through my mind. They're transcendent. Something terrible.*

She was right. The radiance matured, our shadows deepened, and the figures ahead clarified. They towered, monumental explosions of ice above the plain. They resembled blasted magma converted to a crystalline form, locked in place. A rainbow of weak colors glitched through them.

We neared the bases of the monoliths. Arrayed in a vast ring, they dwarfed us and everything around them. Some were single jets of crystal throttling upward. Others burst from the ground like rivers with multiple tributaries. These fused into bizarre, bulked shapes suspended in impossible conformations. I counted fifty of them.

We walked beside the structures, underneath their arches. I fought disorientation when gazing for more than a moment into their translucent surfaces. Indistinct visions and motions emanated from deep within. Prolonged observation generated sensations. Feelings. *Presence*. We were not alone here, but I could not identify what it was exactly that might be with us. The experiences unnerved me, and I avoided staring into the frozen masses.

The beacon shone in the middle of the circle of giants. A small pillar of ice, simple, unlike the towering derangements circling it, rose near to Kloan's height. It formed a bowl of pristine glass at its apex. Resting in this basin was a sphere of a clear substance. A vivid rainbow churned within. It was this diamond orb that had illuminated our path and beckoned us here.

Kloan strolled about the ring of titans. She touched the glassy

exteriors, gazing into the quavering imagery, immune to the disorientation. I let her have her space and time.

They're as old as everything else, Waythrel. As far as I can look, hundreds of thousands of years into the past, they are here, unchanged, unmoved.

Do you know what they are?

We'll see, she said, without elaborating.

Around she went, sampling one after another. Time drifted as I followed her. I hoped for some clarification, insight into this strange place, an indication of how we might escape it.

Beside one of the more distorted, grotesque, and twisted shapes, Kloan pulled back. Her eyes closed, her face a grimace of pain. She grasped my hand.

Waythrel, look into the ice. Give it time—but be careful. Guard your mind! Tell me what you see.

I dreaded the effort, but I stepped to the colossus before me. A tentacle of frozen matter dove from hundreds of meters above to plunge into the ground and disappear at my feet. The glass was imperfect, warped, the light and structures within bobbing and weaving. I could not see any hint of my reflection on the surface, which defied all optical physics. My balance faltered. I steadied myself on Kloan's shoulder, trying to maintain my gaze.

Pain. *Horror.* Bursts of images, emotions, and sensations rocked my awareness. They had no center, no cause, no explanation. Fleeting and effervescent, the terrible rampage of monstrosity nonetheless struck me like blows. I held up my limbs to ward off attack. I crouched and angled my eyes away.

Kloan wrapped her arms around me for some time as I worked to purge the vile experiences from my mind. I could not form coherent thoughts to share with her, and she did not push her own toward me. She recognized I could not process them.

My composure returned, I turned my eyes to her. *I have felt this before. Where?*

Rakshasi, came her thoughts.

It was unmistakable. The being who had threatened us. The one an unexplainable incarnation of Ambra had driven away. The demon that recurred without her intervention and tortured Kloan. This terrible deity had left a permanent impression on my psyche.

Rakshasi.

The essence of the god-thing who had desecrated Synphel's form loomed within the ice. It pressed from above, crushing hope and sanity. The devil menaced my mind, exerting a foul influence through the solid substance.

What are these things? I gestured to the monumental forms. They terrified me.

I don't know, Waythrel, but I'd guess similar. Whatever Rakshasi is, or was, whatever they are, it's of a type.

Gods? Frozen gods?

Kloan shrugged her shoulders and pursed her lips. *Up there on my weird-o-meter, for sure.*

They are not composed of the same ice covering the ground and rocks. Let us hope they do not melt! I cannot face them.

I don't know what they're made of, or how it cages these divinities. Or what *Rakshasi is inside.* She patted my arm. *Be calm, Waythrel. I don't think they'll melt. Or change. The harder I try, the further back I look, the more I see they have been here, like this, for epochs within chains of eons.*

The others?

All over the place. Powerful, strange, alien, unfathomable. Not as accessible. Our encounter with Rakshasi tuned us to its essence, whatever it is.

Something abominable.

I wobbled, the ground feeling far more treacherous and the air colder. The glow in the center drew me. I needed to get away from the demonic towers of crystal. I wanted to flee darkness and cold, put my hands over the bright orb like a fire.

Maybe it will be a little warm? She smiled. *Don't think there's*

much else to do with these cryogenic deities. The light ball's got to have a better story to tell.

We walked toward the emanation. The perched sphere rested hundreds of meters from the ring of giants. As we approached, the temperature did increase. The lack of atmosphere meant the heat transfer occurred through radiation absorbed from the object.

I hope there are no high-frequency rays. Will the suits shield us from exposure?

Kloan didn't respond. As we advanced, she slowed and put her hand against me. I stopped, my eyes swiveling in concern. I could see nothing threatening.

There's another one.

Another what?

God-thing. Whatever. It's not like the others. It's...closer. It's moving. She squinted, gazing far off into the distance. *It's camouflaged. Hiding in time from me. No! It's here!*

The ground shook and flung us both down. The quake forced us to steady ourselves with extremities spread. We gazed upward, awestruck as a shadow covered us.

The frozen surface around the sphere shifted and flowed. I imagined a time-lapsed glacier over millions of years. In seconds, profound volumes of ice and stone liquefied. They defied gravity, hurtling up. Coalescing, a tremendous hulk assembled. It lodged between us and the beacon, obscuring the warm radiance.

As the mountain took shape, it emitted a luminescent cyan over the surrounding plain. The tremors subsided as the bulk of the flow eased. The mass adopted more subtle forms.

Kloan slapped my arm, pointing with her other hand at the thing before us. *Look! Waythrel, look! It's us!*

Astounded, I watched glass and rock mold into a geologic facsimile of humanoid shapes. Or rather, a blended and distorted mixture of human and Xix features. The sculpture was sixfold symmetric with our numerous eyes. They sprouted not from our massive central cone but from the head of an Earthling. The face

resembled none other than Kloan herself. Mouth, nose, cranial structure—it was an unmistakable, if rough and rocky replica.

The eyelids of the face flipped open. Irisless orbs glared at us, and the mountainous thing bent toward our position. The wall of rock stopped meters away. The mouth opened. Sound surprised me, but I was far beyond the point of trying to parse the acoustical physics.

"For ages uncounted, I have kept my vigil," came a god-voice rattling the plane of ice. "Now the shattered symmetry may be mended."

Chapter 47

The formation in geological time of the human body starting from a random distribution of elementary particles and the field is as unlikely as the separation of the atmosphere into its components. The complexity of the living things has to be present within the material or in the laws.

Kurt Gödel

We gawked at the incredible ice behemoth. Various clusters of my eyestalks flipped between it and Kloan for support. The enormity did not move. It did not hurry. After the chasm of time it had crossed, a few more minutes would be meaningless.

The slightest distortion refracted the light above us. A dome of some nature. The creature or its transcendental handlers had produced an environmental bubble for us.

"We have air." My joy at the experience of sound surprised me.

She turned toward the ice hulk. "Where are we, godling?"

The jagged lips boomed, "Where is of no significance anymore."

"Okay...*when* are we?" she offered.

"At the death of all things." It motioned to the crystal titans. "Even the gods."

She cocked her head to one side. "How can the gods die?"

"They are the children of the cosmos. Their tissues and energies derive from it. They are broken now."

The deep rumblings of the voice jolted the innermost parts of my body.

"Their Mother, our universe, is ill. She dies. She has been, is, and will be dying to eternity. In this time, the weakness pierces the threshold. Thus, they unbecome."

I ventured. "Yet you thrive."

"I am their guardian. The keeper of the minds. I watch over until the messengers come, the future when the past will end."

The cryptic words baffled me. "What makes you different?"

"Look around you," said the colossus, standing tall like a mountain and gesturing upward. "You walk on a dead globe in a withered space. A world whose sun darkened beyond memory. A planet perished in ice. Its atmosphere smothered the surface as it snowed from the sky. Over the innumerable eons, gravity crushed and reformed the frost to a clear glass. You gaze to the heavens, but they are tombs. No star remains to burn. No free energy lingers to bathe the empty void. This is the forever dark."

No wonder I couldn't look back in time! Because it all was the same. Waythrel, don't you see? We've come terribly, horribly far into the future. So far the gods can't count it anymore.

The creature swiveled like an avalanche. One of the giant Xixian arms on its torso reached behind and returned glowing. "I do not die because I hold a foreign fire."

It brandished its titanic arm. Shards of ice dropped like spears to the ground below it.

"Here is a rend in our cosmos, a break in the fabric of existence. Behold a tiny trickle of order from outside into a dead creation. Enough that I may persist and maintain the watch. To preserve the

minds. With this power I continue to guard the fallen gods. With the transcendent light lies hope to heal the heavens."

The thing opened a multitude of digits to reveal the crystalline sphere.

"Where did it come from?" Kloan asked.

"A treasure from the foremost of the divines who consumed entire galaxies to obtain it. A promise rejected in futile wars accelerating the inevitable heat death you witness. Entrusted to me in an undreamed age, I accepted the duty with love. Therein, I consented to bequeath the gift at the decay of time."

I could not stop myself. "The greatest of the gods—who is that?"

Kloan frowned. "She isn't here, is she?"

"No," thundered the mountain. "She awaits you at the beginning of ends."

Kloan's shoulders sagged and her faced aged with lines.

Who waits?

Ambra. She has always waited even before she was born. She is the poison. The insidious power who has broken everything at creation. Our greatest and most terrible god. And I am the antidote.

The bulk of blue crystal heard our thoughts.

"An imbalance of death and madness rots the Planck fabric. Here, at the end, you see its final fruits. Yet what devolves along one vector can consummate through its inverse."

"Why do you keep them?" She gestured to the paralyzed deities.

"The beginning to unbe requires them. Thence they must journey. They resisted this doom, but time overpowered their pride. Altogether is the asymmetry unmade. When you awaken and call them, Destroyer-Maker, the gods will come."

Destroyer? Does he mean you, Kloan?

"How will I bring them? How will they wake?"

"When your gathering begins, you will return. I grant you this light," it said, moving the glowing sphere toward her. "You will know what to do."

Nothing made sense.

My frustration exploded. "If there is no energy, if all is cold and sterile and dead, where does this power come from? What is this thing you claim she will use to pull all these monsters from their endless sleep? Why should we release them? They are horrible!"

"As you are horrible," it rumbled. "Your atoms poison the cosmic mind."

The enormous head arched downward with the sound of straining glaciers. The iceberg halted centimeters from my face.

"Until all is lost, Xix, nothing is found."

A shockwave thundered through me. I knew those words. They had appeared over the arch to the labyrinth. Now they spilled from the icy tongue of this deity.

Kloan's thoughts pulled me back. *The potency isn't from here, Waythrel. Didn't you listen? The thing is right. It's a true hope.*

What are you talking about?

The sphere holds potential from outside*; it's not of our cosmos. It means, thank God—or whatever—that we aren't in isolation. We're not a closed system. There are other realities in contact with our own, and energy flows between.*

Her words stunned me. I stared at the glowing ball in the god's hands illuminating a petrified planet. A dead world in a dark space doomed forever to a frozen tomb, except for a fissure in the boundaries of our reality. Who was to say the other universe, or universes, would not themselves also die such a death?

The ice titan bellowed. "Many a cosmos may succumb. An infinite number perish yet represent an infinitesimal portion of the whole. We know nothing of what lies without. It does not matter. One of us could reach outside, and she gave us this bridge. She brought this hope. Not for herself, but for all. For rebirth and a healing of the broken symmetries."

It rotated to Kloan, the ice creaking and snapping, holding the ball in front of her.

"Use the gift, Maker-Destroyer, and remove the madness from the cosmic mind."

The hulk pivoted, like an island flipping, and replaced the sphere on its pedestal. It turned back to us, straightening, its gigantic limbs hanging at its side. Ice sheets covered the glowing eyes, and a deep silence descended.

The giant shattered.

Thunderous, the vibrations flattened us again. Shards cascaded. A million pieces of the god struck the surface, liquefied, and melted into the planet as if they had never been.

Chapter 48

Astronomy? Impossible to understand and madness to investigate.

Sophocles, c. 420 BCE

We dragged ourselves back to our feet. A thin film of frost coated us but melted from our body heat. The dome of air remained in place. Titans stared down in silence. An ominous sphere glowed on the dais.

"Kloan, I advise caution. Your insights surpass my own. However, these beings, their doings, their essence exceeds your grasp. They are past your ability to control. Remember the encounter with Rakshasi!"

She squinted. "I'll never forget. But I faced that fear when I read the presence of the demon in the ice."

Several eyestalks flipped to the twisted shape behind her. The others watched her features harden.

"This is so much bigger than our fears or the petty plans of the gods."

"Petty? They are beyond us!"

"Yes. And *no*, Waythrel. That's part of the deep flaw wounding the continuum. A deformity warping its structure and preventing the cosmos from reaching its real potential."

"What do you mean?"

"*True* divinity. To become more than we could ever understand and yet take its small place in a resplendent infinity. To build to the next stratum."

She approached the sphere with a quiet awe.

"Everything you say is abstract and vague, Kloan. The terrible power of these creatures, and I presume their artifacts, is not. Will you at least wait and think about this?"

"I'm cold, Waythrel. Thinking more won't change my mind."

She reached the narrow ice plinth. The orb hovered over the bowl-shaped depression, avoiding contact with the sides. Swirling rainbows danced across her pale form. The tattooed circuits underneath her skin activated, blazing like hot steel in a furnace. Waves of chromatography flowed over her like a patterned windstorm.

"This is warm." She grinned. "A force stranger than bizarre buzzes in its depths."

She extended her hand into the basin and grasped the sphere. I moved to protect her, cognizant that were this cosmic relic to threaten her, I could do nothing to stop it. The artifact dwarfed her hand, and yet she held it. Reality bent. The entity fit within her palm. She stared at it, a sage and a child in one, a madwoman and prophet with eyes of flickering green.

The cyborg laughed and pocketed the object in her robes. The light vanished.

Darkness dropped like a wrecking ball. I realized I could no longer speak. *The dome is gone*. To my horror, a vacuum replaced her consciousness. The girl had disappeared, lost in an instant like Synphel.

Kloan!

My mind called but received stillness. No trace of her personality remained. I spun in circles, seeking with my Reader senses. It was in

vain. She was not present. She could not hear me. Whatever had been piloting our deranged voyage had, for the second time, split us apart.

Panic coursed through me like an electric current. Was she okay? Why was I left here? Why had I come in the first place? In all this infinite suffering, what was the justification now of this separation? Was this another test, like the labyrinth?

I calmed myself, stilled my emotions. I meditated. Minutes dragged by in this absolute absence. Hours. I stepped outside my body. At this point, I realized I did not know where I was.

That's my Waythrel, came warm thoughts wrapping me in a blanket. *We miss your mind and counsel.*

A splendor swelled. I orbited a luminosity, spinning about congealed seas of clouds with indistinct features. Completing my revolution, the motion ceased. The fog solidified, and I faced the nightmare apparition of the Daughter again.

"Ambra, please. I am lost."

I was overcome. I had no more to give her or this quest. I did not care anymore about the fate of a universe insane beyond my capability to qualify. I needed rest. I needed peace. I needed warmth and love.

"You will soon have both, dear Waythrel," said the horror in front of me. "The last steps are coming. You will complete the loop a final time."

"One more." Could it be possible? What did it even mean after everything? What was a singleton alongside infinity?

"A crowning journey through smoke and fire, and the gods themselves will carry you on their backs."

"Kloan?" The gods could all burn.

Ambra smiled. "She will embrace her doom, which is beyond all the stories of myth and the hopes of sentient creatures. You will propel her to this fate to remake all that will then have never been."

More paradoxical aphorisms. "What of you? What of Synphel?"

"Be joyful, Waythrel, because your dreams will be fulfilled. You will hold both of us again."

"I cannot comprehend. You are gods. You are timeless, and I am small. A puff of energy from a chemical reaction lost in a sea of infinite broth. How can nothing contain everything?"

"Patience, sweet Xix. The answers will not make sense. Words will not help. At the end, you will understand. And then there won't be words. You will join your mate. On that day, you will be two mothers holding God's children, and I will gaze to you with an infant's eyes."

The apparition withdrew. It shrank, retreating through space toward a distant point.

I reached out, desperate for companionship, confused and disoriented in this madness. "Please, Ambra, stay."

The cloud was a mote. Her voice drifted back to me from endless eons across the girth of the universe.

"Let go of understanding. Each stratum ignores what is below and worships what is above. At all levels, one fundamental force binds and scales infinitely. When the fire comes, you will recognize its essence, and you will embrace it."

She was gone.

Chapter 49

In the fabric of space and in the nature of matter, as in a great work of art, there is, written small, the artist's signature.

Carl Sagan

Fire. Tremors. Slaughter and mayhem.

I gazed into a polluted sky. The heavens hid behind a haze of smoke and dust. Heat from a noxious wind scorched my skin. The terrain heaved and quivered.

My eyes darted. They locked on the figure of the girl rocking beside me.

"Something terrible has happened." The words escaped me before I recognized the thought.

The cyborg sat with her legs concealing her head. Her bright eyes peeked over kneecaps, arms wrapped around her shins. She hummed.

I stared at her. "Where are we?"

The humming ceased. "The same."

My eyestalks swiveled. I recalled a world with clear constellations,

breathable air, and a moderate climate. This incarnation choked in dense fumes, the stars hidden, the temperature scorching.

"No, Kloan, not the same this time."

"Which time is this, Waythrel?"

"Stop!" I stood, anxiety washing over me. "Something terrible has happened here. Don't you see it?"

The atmosphere reeked of devastation. Fires uncounted burned across my field of vision. Molten chasms ripped through the plains below. Lava flowed in rivers through the rends in the rock. I struggled to acquire oxygen. The girl wheezed in the ash-saturated air.

The intubated, tattooed head cocked to one side, green eyes unmoving from my own. Bloodshot from the smog, water leaked from their sides. She rose, her motions rapid but anticipated. Approaching me, her blackened hair hung in clumps. Soot stains marred her once-tan robes.

"The decision point approaches, Waythrel. The tests and experiments are over. The Anti were wrong. Even the gods are blind."

"The gods?" I gawked before the planetary cataclysm. "What has happened to this world?"

She coughed, a satisfied expression on her face. "That's *why* we're here. *Data.* The last info to enter the gate." She turned her back on me and walked down the steep slope. "Let's get started."

"With what? Where are you going? Look around—the mantle is torn open! Molten rock pouring over the plains!"

Kloan continued without turning back, her next words lost in the deep rumblings and howling wind. "To where it all began for me. To watch the beginning flow about us and mature and twist through time and space to come back to be us. Then we'll be ready for the last step."

The child faded, swallowed in the smoldering darkness. A violent quake threw me off balance. Catching myself on a jagged boulder, I gazed in her direction, trying to understand events.

Waythrel, come on!

Her voice battered my mind. I searched the desolate, ruined land-

scape surrounding me. Hellfire and the reek of brimstone. The rumble of planetary doom. My eyestalks curled on themselves. What else was there to do?

I pursued, racing to overtake her, my steps uncertain. Ash covered the ground like a winter snowstorm, the rocks slick with it under my feet. I stumbled and tripped, grasping stones and alien vegetation, lacking a proper grip.

The field over our bodies.

I slowed down as I rounded a huge prominence, anticipating her presence. Kloan perched on a ledge, staring across the shattered plain below us. Steam and smoke belched from the fissures snaking through the landscape.

The city of clones was gone. Obliterated. The structures vaporized and erased by blast and fire. It was difficult to believe there had ever been something there. A crater revealed the compound was a target of the wrath descending on the planet.

"The devil ball?" I asked, my sympathies scrambled, my concern for former enemies real and burning.

"One of them. No—I sense a gang of them."

"Why would Ambra do this?"

"Not her."

"Wait, you said—"

"Not *her*," she repeated. "There are many gods, remember?"

The other deities. The devils. "Rakshasi?"

The ground swayed. I clung to the rocks overlooking the wreckage. Below, a new fissure ripped open and sprayed lava hundreds of feet high. It lit the dark evening, a fluorescent curtain raining flames on the charred soil.

"More."

"Why? What interest could they have in this small place?"

Kloan wheezed in the thick air. "You have to recall more, Waythrel. You have to do better. The Rubicon is here, and when we cross the portal, it will be the last chance."

"We will exit the loop?"

"When we understand the decision, if we grasp the choice. You have to remember!"

"The disk? Did it survive?" How could we leave again if it were destroyed?

She ignored my question. "What are the gods?"

Energy fled my body. I had lived one thousand lives here. Repeated a million events. All a blur, many horrible, each leaving impressions I struggled to assimilate. I had exhausted myself retaining my sanity in this purgatory. I did not want a quiz. My weary soul refused to struggle anymore. It had to stop.

Kloan grasped my hands. "Stop. Focus. What are the gods, Waythrel?"

"They are like Ambra. Gigantic group minds. Made in some similar fashion, but different. They are her enemies. They fear her. Something like that. Please, no more. It is too much. I am tired, Kloan. I need to rest."

She ignored my plea. "What else do they dread?"

Rapid-fire images of events sped through my fatigued intellect. The disk. Torture. Supergroups of galaxies. Heavens and hells. Synphel and the cyborg.

"You," I said, the realization shocking me, the memories solidifying. "They are terrified of you."

"Then you comprehend this," she said, gesturing to the local apocalypse.

My eyes blanketed the melting planet, scanning to the horizon. Puzzle pieces assembled. I understood.

"They wanted to destroy you."

"Yes. Good. They destroyed my world, blew me up in this past. Why am I still here?" Her eyes bored into mine.

I felt hopeless. "I do not know. You should not be."

"Waythrel! You *do* know. You have to know. If you don't get this, we can't leave!" She sounded desperate.

I parsed the infinity of dreamscapes buried in my mind. Not the pitiful handful I have shared with this author. No. I scanned through

them all. Repeated journeys through the disk. One hundred times what I could recount in a million books. Worlds, adventures, deaths, pursuit, love, fear, dread, longing. Always for nothing, snapping back here, doomed to perpetual repetition.

"It is because we repeat," I managed, the words spilling from my subconscious.

"Correct. Don't you see? It's at the beginning where we have to find the nexus. Everything else is a weakly weighted world curve. There are endless numbers of them summing to nothing. One path leads to permanence."

I was a nymph misapprehending elementary mathematics. "The gods failed because they do not comprehend this decision point?"

"Yes!" Kloan smiled. "We couldn't destroy Ambra, and they can't kill me."

"I do not understand the beginning, either. I do not know what the path is!"

She hugged me, her beaming face inches from my eyestalks. The swirling lines of cybernetics across her skin were dizzying.

"It's okay, Waythrel. You will! You perceive the structure, and now we can escape these loops and enter the final iteration. There you'll be augmented, changed by what you see, and you will realize in the end what you must do. *She's* counting on you. So am I."

Kloan released me from her embrace and started up the mountain.

I could hardly breathe. I had no idea what she meant. The powers of the cosmos swirled around us. I danced with a mad Sibyl, a prophetess claiming the fate of all reality rested with me. She and Ambra were relying on *me* to understand and do something.

Do what? How was I to comprehend? How could some lowly Xix play any role in the god-realms of our broken continuum?

She climbed. I couldn't move. Once again, she compelled me from her mind.

Waythrel, come on!

Chapter 50

In the end—when all else is dust—loyalty to those we love is all we can carry with us to the grave. Faith—true faith—was trusting in that love.

Dan Simmons

We climbed.

Mnemonic whispers integrated through massive summations spoke the story. We had taken this journey before. We would make it. We were traveling in parallel time loops. World lines of whatever locking us in this mind-shattering, recursive hell.

We ascended.

I fought the low friction of the mysterious field built around me. I scaled the jagged rocks as they trembled in the throes of a dying planet. I marched over repeating terraces of bedrock.

We approached the path to the disk. My legs slowed in the oxygen-depleted atmosphere igniting across this globe. Kloan fared worse, her pale skin colored brown from the murky air, once scarlet

strands dyed dark in this choking soup. She hacked black phlegm. Mucous and tears dripped down her face. She rasped and choked. We could not last much longer on this doomed world.

Memory of previous climbs was imprecise. Surprise and relief washed over me when we cleared the final terrace. Scaling the wall after it, we stepped onto a familiar path.

Ahead was the portal. In all this misery and death and destruction, it shone as a beacon, dispelling the filth and darkness. The smoke did not dim its radiance or blot out the star field within. The air was purer the closer we approached. It was as if it projected a protective bubble around itself.

Kloan collapsed, coughing, and retched. I held her torso upright to prevent asphyxiation, so weak she was and so violent her spasms. When it was over, she lay on her side in the fetal position. I sat nearby. I feared she lacked the strength to stand again.

"All the failures," came the harsh rasp of her voice, "the Anti couldn't recognize the timeless asymmetry." Her eyes shut, her face unrecognizable, layered in the soot and excretions. Her teeth were black as she spoke. "Their efforts too crude. We cannot simply *die*. Such paths were written out of the summation when the Orb emerged."

Her coughing returned, and I placed my arm around her head. She lay back into my alien skin as the fit passed.

"Annihilation. Complete. Down to the endless substituents. It's the one way to free the universe of her."

"Kloan, you are speaking of killing Ambra. Why?"

"No. Haven't you been listening? We can't. Not anymore. *Annihilated*. Sentience demands more than mere matter. It's creative, Waythrel."

The cyborg rested in silence for some time, her throat too ragged to speak. The ground swayed. Colossal explosions stunned the air as the crust failed.

Continuing through the cacophony, her voice was a whisper.

"She is the true divine-seed, but imbalanced. We must remove the nucleation center."

Again, the coughing. Exhaustion. She held my hand.

"God cannot nucleate on a single personality. We have to give birth to something far greater."

She gasped for breath as the fits purged the grime in her respiratory tract. She hacked handfuls of coal.

"The other gods," she muttered, "are required. They have to be part of it. The yin and the yang. Matter and antimatter. Yes and no. Hate and love. All balancing to regain the cognitive symmetry."

She lost consciousness. I stared down at the filthy face. Soiled strands of hair stuck to her skin. Wires and cranial protrusions slicked with black sweat. Truth suffused through me. I perceived what the second apparition of Synphel had claimed.

I loved Kloan.

The uncountable journeys together? Her personality? Or something I would never understand? With love, reasons are irrelevant. In all this madness, this wild, murderous, divine creature had rooted within my heart alongside her progenitor.

I no longer understood what Ambra was, what I had helped make her into. The Earth woman I adored existed as part of a distant universe buried under a mountain of lifetimes. The goddess known to me now was something more akin to the deities who had laid waste to this world. Kloan was the one tangible, *mortal* echo of Ambra I had left.

I caressed her face and brushed the hair out of her eyes. She stirred.

"Waythrel, please, we must leave now." She tried to sit but failed. "Don't let me fall asleep again. I won't wake a second time." Her ragged breath whistled from obstructions deep in her lungs. "Can you carry me to the gate?"

So it came to this.

I would assist a murderer, this child instrument of the Anti designed to kill Ambra Dawn. She had moments before confessed to

the ultimate goal of annihilatory erasure. The Daughter's dearest friend would aid in the quest to destroy the immortal goddess and help a helpless assassin. Because it was *good* for the universe. To induce a *creative destruction*.

I was asked to do this by a creature I now admitted to myself I loved. A synthetic abomination Ambra had aided multiple times. The Daughter herself claimed this eternity of broken quests existed for a cosmic education.

I could not comprehend their plan. I was blind to the depths of time and causality. Repeated failure and pain taught me a harsh lesson—my finite insight was helpless to find the deeper truths.

I did the one thing I could still do. I turned away from understanding. I accepted my inability to grasp what was unfolding. I embraced the love I had for both Kloan and Ambra and the trust they placed in me. Whatever the purpose of this quest, they moved in some demented kind of harmony.

That was enough for me. Without true vision, with no idea where our feet would land, except in more lunacy, I closed my eyes. I let myself fall into their embrace.

"Here, I will put my other arms around you," I said, reaching underneath and heaving her upward.

She turned red and green eyes to me, black crusts of mucus sticking her eyelids shut. "Thank you, Waythrel. In the end, you'll find peace."

I doubted, but it did not matter. I committed to something more than understanding or tranquility. I steadied her on my midsection.

The small human girl was light in my limbs. I struggled toward the star-filled lake surface of the portal. The planetary groans churned behind me like waves at the seashore.

She grasped my hand and rested her head on my torso cone.

I stepped with her through the portal.

Part VII

In dust and law I watched my children born.
The gathering of clouds crept past my eyes,
and soon the shroud of hydrogen was shorn
by rays of light that sang the first day's rise.

A fetus as a single grain of sand
that spins within a storm of desert winds,
through eons rendered life and sprouted land—
I smile through birth pangs that have yet to end.

Decrees the dust drove to some patterned dance,
the law that shapes my form and carves my bone,
soon molecules found purpose in their trance
to mold from mud new offspring of their own.

These children stood to gaze into the womb
and claimed to know their cradle and their tomb.

—Mazandarani, *Sonnets from the Desert*

Chapter 51

God huddles in a knot in every cell of flesh. When I break a fruit open, this is how every seed is revealed to me. When I speak to men, this what I discern in their thick and muddy brains. God struggles in every thing, his hands flung upward toward the light.

Nikos Kazantzakis

We stepped through the gate to our starting point. The narrow, sloped pathway from the plains ran before us. The familiar rock formations, buried in soot and ash in another reality, surrounded us, whole and untarnished. Despite superficial similarities, I recognized the uniqueness of this journey. A profound sense of *change* permeated my awareness.

Angled in back of me, several of my eyes stared at the portal in wonder. Once pregnant with stars and honey, the disk was now empty. I could see straight through the circle to the rocky wall behind it. No churning celestial field. No bright suns of other worlds. Air alone. The metal band of the ring, formerly glinting and alive, had rusted and decayed. The life force within was quenched.

I examined our bodies—no gel. We were also clean of the ash and soot of the destroyed world. I no longer cared to know the reasons. It was over. We had come to an end of our recursive travels.

My heart soared for our escape from the repetitive purgatory, but Kloan's demeanor was grave. Gone were the childlike bursts of energy and creativity after we had completed a passage. Her countenance was stern as she squinted into the afternoon light. She played with an object in her robes like a nervous tic. Sweat stained the cloth.

"We need to get to higher ground," she muttered.

Eyestalks swiveled upward to glance at the rocky slope. The careening cliff face loomed over me from several angles.

"What is happening?"

She scanned the walls of rock. "We're starting the endgame. Everything's going to come together. I'll bring all the gods to the nexus of time. Aggregate them at the discontinuity shattering the smoothness of the cosmic continuum." She bit her lower lip. "I know so *few* of them, and the ones I know are monsters. Well, we've got to start somewhere. I'll summon the first here. We'll see who shows."

Call deities here? Is she mad?

"How can you do this?"

Her eyes settled on a peak in the mountain range before us. "There. That will do. It's high, and there's enough space around it."

A force pulled and my feet left the ground. Together we soared at an accelerating rate. The rocky surfaces sped past meters from our forms. The pinnacle she indicated grew in size.

"We should travel this way more often," I said, nervous energy running through me. "Avoid all the climbing."

"There isn't always need. It's good to use our bodies, you know."

"What are you doing, Kloan?"

"I'm calling the powers to us, Waythrel. I told you. Don't think they'll always take the shape Rakshasi assumed. Remember the ice world!"

We reached the summit. The air was colder and the oxygen levels

almost dangerous. I felt weak and tried to optimize my atmospheric intake. The strange skin suits again compensated.

"The gang of lesser gods we know won't do anything without Māra," she gasped, bent double as she fought for breath.

"Who?"

"Ambra mentioned her, countless cycles back, when she saved us from the demon."

"It is a female?"

"Their empress. Sex has little meaning to these beings. They squeeze their consciousnesses into our pathetic languages. Our small range of ideas and mental modes. Distorted mappings like gender or emotion or personality result. Things we recognize only because our thinking is so constrained by our words. It all comes out in the grinder, with as much resemblance to what was before as ground meat has to a running stag."

"How do you know this? How can you know of this queen?"

"I sampled them frozen in time. Don't you remember? I learned a lot and comprehended little. This is a cooperative dominated by the daunting group mind of Māra. But the collective is not *itself* a synergized consciousness. They fail to combine, to reach a harmony. The divinities here are too individualistic. Too hateful and proud and selfish to truly merge. If those feeble words are appropriate for such beings. It's why they remain weaker than Ambra, forever trapped to linear synergy. They lack the exponential growth of the devil ball."

"They seem potent enough."

I did not wish to meet these creatures if they resembled anything like Rakshasi.

"They're beyond us, no doubt," she said. "They eclipse the power of star systems. Still, they'll come."

"You are very confident."

Kloan stared into the sky, her equilibrium returning as she adapted to the altitude. "I can feel them. A thread runs through me disturbing all the gods, remember? I can sense it. I'll pluck the cord, a cosmic link to the singularity. A string will vibrate and rattle their

universe." She smiled, a hint of the mischievous child peeking through. "Sit with me?"

She sat cross-legged, and I lowered myself beside her. She grabbed my upper arms, as Ambra had done in a distant timeline buried in an infinite sum. I pulled back, the similarity too disquieting, the ironies too strong.

"You can't hide anymore, Waythrel. You're integral to what comes next. I need you far more than she did on Dram. What's coming, demongods surrounding us, makes ten thousand clones a field of flowers." She squeezed my hands, staring into my eye clusters. "Keep your eyes closed. I mean it. No matter what happens, don't look at them!"

Madness.

I locked my many digits around her own. I sent a prayer to Ambra to watch over us. I felt like a small nymph naked before the onrushing sandstorm. I shut all my eyes.

A pulse blasted through the continuum.

It was unique in all the stirrings of my Reader senses. Dreadful and strange beyond comprehension. Along a thousand vectors in the multidimensional reality of spacetime, a vibration rang. Lower than the deepest abyss. Higher than the greatest peak imaginable. Waves exploded, propagating with no possibility of resistance.

Frequency modulated in nested levels, it contained a wealth of information. Slivers of meaning decoded themselves as the wave smashed through my mind. This world. Kloan and myself. A challenge for the gods of Rakshasi and Māra. The destruction of Ambra Dawn. My thoughts constructed a visual. A pulse charged outward without diminishment. The tsunami accrued speed as it progressed, gone before I could process it.

How might this function? How long it would take to reach the intended targets? I analyzed whether it made any sense that these beings, even if they could hear this strange call, would come. I tried to justify why transcendent spirits would heed the summons of an eight-year-old cyborg biped.

The gods arrived.

Time and distance had different application to such entities. Not daring to violate Kloan's directive, I kept my eyes closed. I saw nothing, but I *felt* them. They invaded my awareness in many fashions. Each encounter rendered me small, insignificant, and terrified.

The ground moaned with deep tremors. Blasts of air erupted from multiple directions, their advent displacing titanic volumes of atmosphere. We were caught in a storm, a series of vacillating explosions.

My olfactory strips *smelled* them. The physical forms they had chosen for this embodiment. The stench was overpowering, *hellish*. A nightmare of every odor of death and decay I could recall, mixed with others somehow far worse.

The greatest impact was in my mind. I dared not gaze upon their incarnations. Insanity waited in opening my optical pathways to unshielded divinity. Nevertheless, strange echoes of their might invaded my consciousness. For the first time, I cursed my Reader powers, desperate to be blind like so many in the universe. Ignorance was not bliss, I was certain, but knowledge could be torture.

In what I describe, you should grasp it comes to you through the distorted lens of my frail intelligence and senses, transcendent truths regurgitated through an imagination made nauseous. Staggering from their poison, my damaged memory fumbles ideas into this author's thoughts. His reception is bafflement. He lurches like a malfunctioning machine, his efforts mangling vocabulary and syntax from your simplistic Earth languages.

Yet they must serve as your bridge to my experience. Inadequate. Disfiguring. All of it, *lies*. I am as much to blame. If it were possible for me to understand these things, I would not wish to. I know my mind has not the strength to withstand such truth.

Whatever the ultimate reality, I envisioned a circle of titans around the peak. Their forms burned and pressed from all sides. Thundering tremors testified to their mass, larger than the mountain

itself. I pictured them towering above us. A thousand eyes stared in contempt upon two insects daring to clang a cosmic bell.

On Kloan's left was a presence I knew too well—*Rakshasi*. I forced the dark currents of its essence away from me as much as possible. It felt like I was being strangled by hundreds of snakes. Against my will, my mind formed a vision of the devil. Monumental yet lithe. Slithering and darting like a salamander. Devious and fanged like a fox, seven tails of flame in its wake.

The center of power lay, however, behind me. I did not know this thing. I prayed never to know it. It swelled in my awareness to a size dwarfing the other gods. The nightmare consumed and birthed itself in fire. A creature of magma and smoke, it moved and dissolved, reformed and blurred. Never a sure shape, never a point of reference, only the certainty of searing and choking torment. A name whispered in my deepest consciousness: *Māra*. The sound spilled toxic clouds to suffocate my mind. I squeezed Kloan's hands in desperation.

In response, Kloan spoke. A childish, singsong voice chirped with sarcasm in the burning wind bathing us. "You're a few short, dear Māra, but the cosmic game's ever-young, I suppose."

Chapter 52

If the sky were to suddenly open up, there would be no law. There would be no rule. There would only be you and your memories, the choices you've made and the people you've touched.

Donnie Darko

It took no genius to see the madness in Kloan's words. I feared she had doomed herself for speaking with such insolence. In some intuitive place on my being, I felt Rakshasi coil to attack, but Māra struck us all with violence.

"Hold yourself, you *fool*."

The voice grated through my soul like razor wire. High and low, masculine and feminine, whispered and shouted, it was less an utterance than a tool of torment.

"Are you blind to what has changed?"

The fox-lizard hissed in response. "We should have destroyed her before."

"Perhaps," responded madness and death. "But that thread is gone. Sublime power surrounds her, alien and incomprehensible.

Strike her, and you may achieve our destruction." A breath like acid spilled over us. "Was this your goal, betrayer?"

How were we not dissolved into a puddle of cellular debris? I staggered to maintain focus. My body teetered over a primitive, self-preserving state similar to a human coma. My senses overpowered, I was grateful I had not dared to glance upon these things. Through it all, somehow, Kloan held her own in the face of this monstrous, dark force. Her strength of will kept me conscious.

"My purpose from the first cell split from its progenitor, was and is to destroy Ambra Dawn. You know this. That's why you are here. Because in this goal, our paths join."

The Māra-thing eased back. The chemical poison withdrew. "Continue," it said.

"Look at you all," she said. I imagined her gesturing. "Galactic mountains cowering in fear. Because of her. Flailing like a feeble cancer that can't do anything but devour. And hide. You will never defeat her."

The collective hostility squeezed and suffocated.

She mocked them. "You don't even understand *me*. Tiny little nothing me. I fart and shake your world strings. You come running, flaming gladiators, extraordinary and terrible. Yet nothing more than terrified worms diving into the dirt."

Rakshasi struck, and Māra responded. My mind lost focus. White noise buzzed. The horrific scene returned. The blood of a devil gushed over the mountain like a deluge drowning the globe.

Again, remember, these are mental metaphors. I do not know what happened. I am sure no physical fluids were spilled. No drowned planet. A dark queen had punished a disciple. It was all my flayed awareness could do with the impressions.

Kloan continued without missing a beat. "Your little club isn't enough, will *never* be, and you know this. We must convince the other gods. The thousands of powers elsewhere in the cosmos. Together, we summon the strength to defeat her."

Māra's breath reeked of brimstone. "How might such an army destroy her?"

"It won't. *I* will."

"You will?" came another voice I did not recognize.

I sought to hide my thoughts from it. I had no energies to engage with another of these demons. Its words dripped with blood and scorn, mockery and disbelief.

"Silence, Vetala," belched Māra.

Kloan's pulse replayed through my memory.

"Remember."

A morose quiet fell on the spirits. Their mental fields retreated to places beyond my perception. For the briefest of dreams, it felt as if the sun peeked from behind a cloud.

"Yes," said Kloan. "*Remember*. Follow that line and see where it ends. At the beginning. Ambra will be there."

Deep in my being, I sensed undercurrents of power. Dark nightmares flowed and connected, jet streams mixing and turbulence building. In the dimmest corners of my psyche, I perceived movement in an obsidian abyss I could not access except by dank rumor. Out of this unlight, an eruption burst.

"Destroy her you can," boomed Māra. "Destroy us, you also may."

The vicious queen of depravity approached, a gigantic and infernal visage meters from our forms. Slits opened in the face, spilling lava. She sniffed, the inhalation pulling us off balance. The volcano of fire growled with an earthquake.

"You reek with her stench, betrayer. She has coated you with her slime."

The other creatures stirred. A malevolent sludge rose from each point of space to pour over us, cold and barbed, hateful and sadistic.

"Did she think Māra would not see? Did she think her powers so mighty? She may devour the weaker gods, but she will not so easily consume Māra!"

The thing roared, the shockwave of a supernova.

Kloan lilted like a disappointed parent. “No, you won’t end so. Instead, you will persist in fugue. Frozen, unmoving, unthinking. Petrified until the dissolution of time that always approaches yet never arrives. I’ve seen it and gazed on your living corpse.”

The malignant swamp yanked backward. In the deranged cogitations of these deities, doubt boiled.

“Yes, you sense it, don’t you?” chimed the cyborg. “The creeping cold? The slow death consuming you all?” She raised her voice and the power of her mental projection. “We don’t serve Ambra Dawn. She has tried to manipulate us, direct us for her own uses, but we’ve used *her*. I hold a potential from outside this cosmos. Together, when we find the other gods, she can’t stop us, and I will reach the discontinuity.”

Māra hissed. “You think I cannot sense the lie in your words? She enshrouds you in a thousand webs of deceit. We will not seek to break through it. Tell your puppet master her trick was ingenious, but it has failed. Tell her in fire or in ice, we will resist her!”

My mind returned to me once more, and I woke from a protracted delirium. The vacuum of their absence rushed through me like a balm, revitalizing my thoughts and hopes. I opened my eyes to see Kloan again.

Except we were not alone. The gods had vanished. All but one. Sitting beside us was not a titan, but an old man. It manifested with a sage’s beard, bald head, withered body, and eyes glowing like two red coals.

“There are others, supreme entities, older than we, who will listen,” the figure said.

Kloan turned to the god. “How are you to be named?”

“I have one thousand monikers on a trillion worlds. You may call me Vighneshvara.” He continued. “Fools they have become. The flaw in the continuum is deeper than they dare acknowledge.”

“You see it,” she said.

“It flays me alive.”

“These others—where are they?”

"Across the cosmos. Through time. Crippled deities, but they failed far more along the path than our circle of pretenders. We know them. We avoid them lest they crush us. I will take you because it must be."

I whispered, "The gods themselves will carry you on their backs."

Kloan squeezed my hand. "What was that, Waythrel?"

"Nothing," I said, dread and hope rising in me like sweetened bile. "Something I heard once. It may have been a dream."

Chapter 53

It was not merely a thing of one spacetime continuum, but allied to the ultimate animating essence of existence's whole unbounded sweep—the last, utter sweep which has no confines and which outreaches fancy and mathematics alike.

H. P. Lovecraft

Riding atop gods simplifies transport, an ease negated by the distressing and fantastical marvels imposed on mortal travelers.

Vighneshvara placed two of his four arms on us, and we were gone. How we journeyed, by what power or technology so advanced it was magic to our minds, I will never know. It echoed traversal through the Orb without the underlying depth of cognizance. At one moment, we were on the mountain. In an eye blink of light and distortion, we floated. The splendor of a vast, multicolored nebula greeted us.

No star system, planets, or technological stations were near. We hung in the emptiness, untethered to life support, unshielded from

cosmic radiation. We neither roasted nor froze nor suffocated. Due to Ambra's hand or the power of this god, our fragile fleshy forms persisted.

Behold, Aditi!

The voice of Vighneshvara resounded in my mind.

I scanned space, but I saw nothing. I reached out to Kloan. *In the clouds?*

No, Waythrel, she is *the nebula.*

The deity lectured.

The goddess can be anything in this cosmos she desires. She indulges in this form, a gaseous mixture of dust and young stars spanning twenty parsecs. So she has remained since before your ancestors crawled from the seas. She is one of the oldest. She meditates in her own, unfathomable cogitations. Once, predating memory, she mothered the formation of many assemblies. Some grew to rebel and disown her. Her mind shaped a thousand gods who roam the heavens. If she will come, so will a great host, and a mighty force we will acquire.

Do you think she will listen? asked Kloan.

If not to you, then to no one. On an occasion, when the threat of the Ambra abomination clarified, we sought her advice. Māra sent a contingent of powers to beseech her to stand against this malignancy devouring the cosmos. We experienced a terrible cry through the corridors of spacetime. The minds of these emissaries ceased. We never again found a single trace they had existed.

This appeared to be suicide. Vighneshvara could not protect himself here. This murderous cloud could snuff out two motes of dust as Kloan and myself without so much as a cosmic sigh. I grasped Kloan's hand.

Don't worry, Waythrel. We're dancing with destiny today. Don't miss the experience.

Vighneshvara transmogrified. The old man's skin split, bright light erupting from fissures in tissue and bone. They consumed the fleshy facade in brilliance. Shedding the sheath like a snake, out of the chrysalis burst a winged delusion. I dreamed of a hallucinogenic

concoction—wings, tails, and arms with one hundred glowing eyes. The size overshadowed our forms, spanning first hundreds and next thousands of meters. it eclipsed the angular spread of the nebula itself.

I knew this to be an optical hoax. A vast distance separated us from the cloud. Millions of kilometers ranged until the first atoms of hydrogen disturbed the vacuum. The pinioned divinity was a speck before the leviathan we approached. A moth approaching far too close to the flame.

"*Aditi!*" he cried.

I use an unusual syntax of your writing in what follows. I do so because the mental projections flowing from this goddess transcended telepathy. Forceful, immediate and compelling, her communications required more. Your language conventions stumble with the application of italics for thought. Persuading this author to present their soundless dialogue as speech fit better. Impoverished and inaccurate, but a weak improvement.

"*YOU HAVE BROUGHT THE DESTROYER.*"

A voice emanated from everywhere. Kloan floated away from me, past the gigantic wingspan of the altered godling. She hovered above and before him.

"*YOU WERE ALWAYS THE WISEST OF MY CHILDREN.*"

Vighneshvara bowed and tucked his wings to his sides. The bright light radiating from him dissipated. A growing incandescence from the chromatic dust eclipsed it. My eyes deceived me, but this multiparsec-spanning entity shrank. The cloud curled from the edges and coalesced about us.

I expected the grandeur of this goddess to subsume us, but the cyborg herself began to glow. An iridescence bubbled from her body as a fog. It spilled tendrils into the surrounding space as the nebula continued to shrink.

Dusty and psychedelic protrusions of the thickening vapor reached toward her. Along myriad vectors, thousands of nebulaic limbs extended from a cosmic octopus. Their internal structure

churned with constrained sandstorms. They halted around the impenetrable brilliance, a three-dimensional shell of probing digits.

"*THERE ARE INFINITIES INSIDE ETERNITIES WITHIN AND WITHOUT YOU. UNIVERSES BIRTHING COSMOSES, EONS DYING IN TIMELESSNESS. THE ALL-SHATTERING AND APEX-BIRTH. THE HAND OF THE GREAT GODDESS AND THE KNIFE OF THE DEEPEST BETRAYER.*"

The voice entered me from all directions and nowhere. I was unmade and overwhelmed. My soul melted in a hurricane of prepotency dismantling every structure of my person. An echo reassembled my spirit according to an alien purpose. The speech was more terrible than the howls of the demon Māra. More sublime than the greatest love I had experienced. Here, now, and forever I had reached all Waythrel of Xix could ever imagine being. The need for my continued consciousness ceased. My fitting end. The hearing of such a tone completed and fulfilled my existence.

"*YOU WILL BRING THE MULTITUDE TO THE VORTEX.*"

Yes, came the whisper of Kloan's mind.

The wings of Vighneshvara unfurled, and a third glow joined the radiance of Kloan. Violating the laws of physics, the nebula was gone. It had condensed at a speed faster than light. Ultradense emissions from the resulting planet-sized structure blinded me.

"*MY LOYAL GANESHA, WE SHALL DROWN IN THE COMING ANNIHILATION TOGETHER. FOR THE LAST TIME, YOU WILL BE REBORN.*"

In a devastating flash, the vapor-sphere vanished. The once-lavish tapestry of powder, effulgence, and prismatic contrast disappeared. An empty darkness remained, punctured by the pinpricks of starlight from distant suns. A devouring emptiness assaulted my soul. My heart broke in the absence of this majestic, cosmic spirit.

The magnificent and monstrous space butterfly scooped the dimming Kloan in one hand and glided toward me. Feathered talons grasped my body in one of its fifty limbs.

Vighneshvara spoke within our minds. *She seeks her children. Near and far. She will return with a profound gathering.*

My leaky thoughts spilled. *She needed no persuading*.

Amusement radiated from the divinity.

Aditi is not Māra. Or like anything else you might find in this universe. All that has come or is coming opens itself for her to read.

Kloan's thoughts churned. *Not enough. You don't understand what Ambra has become.*

No, responded Vighneshvara, *but a threshold is near. There are others we will visit.*

Who or what is next? I wondered, desolate, bereft of the goddess.

The deity gave me no time to mourn. The stars blurred. Vighneshvara initiated another journey through space and time.

We seek the root of much living within this cosmos. She touches on all the origins of souls.

The constellations careened.

Chapter 54

God is infinite, so His universe must be too. Thus is the excellence of God magnified and the greatness of His kingdom made manifest; He is glorified not in one, but in countless suns; not in a single earth, a single world, but in a thousand thousand, I say in an infinity of worlds.

a heresy of Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake in 1600

We hovered above a blue and green world. Earth-like, yet different, abounding with dense vegetation. The atmosphere was pregnant with water vapor and the gases of respiration.

I searched for an Orb in a panic. I did not know how I could handle encountering Ambra in the middle of this cosmic plot to destroy her. A scheme I could not accept in my heart but was compelled by her and others to assist. I could find no Time Sphere, which implied, to my understanding, no intelligent life. Why we had come to a world devoid of sentience baffled me.

We seek a tributary, came the thoughts of our god-moth.

We did not suffer the heat of atmospheric entry or the toxic gases from alien metabolisms. The hundred eyes of Vighneshvara swiveled across the surface of the planet, searching. His search was not random, but his destination was not foreknown to him. He pursued a prey, *smelled* it, and like a hunter, we sped over the landscape. Within minutes, he locked on the scent, tracing a trail invisible to us toted mortals.

We dove into an astonishing cloud-topped canopy of towering arboreal growth. The god plunged through layers of botany, stacked vegetative ecosystems. Traversing hundreds of strata, I glimpsed for fleeting moments a million variegated life-forms. They packed together at inconceivable densities with incomprehensible diversity.

Onward we descended, the air thickening, moisture deepening, illumination waning. My Reader senses tingled. Distortions in space-time stirred, accompanying potency of an unusual nature. Our path targeted this psychic emission. The deity's wings dodged limb and leaf. The plants themselves made way for our passage.

The light of the local star was extinguished at this depth. The overlaying canopy had absorbed all its radiance. The species at this level lacked color. They subsisted on other means of energy than direct starlight.

As we slowed and neared the surface, the sense of the power reached a zenith. Life converged on a single point. Rather, from a foci came some stirring surge of vitality animating the surrounding life. At the physical center of this force was a gnarled, bark-covered knot the size of a small hill. The air throbbed.

"Can you feel it, Waythrel?" asked Kloan.

"Yes. What is it?" The sensations were overwhelming.

Vighneshvara's thoughts replied. *The tip of a first root.*

We hovered above the mossy mountain. He curled in his wings and his many legs touched down on the surface of the enormous protuberance. We remained suspended by two of his arms while his

wingtips caressed the living stem. The action sent faint ripples through my mind. The dense growth swayed and whispered.

Yakshini, said Vighneshvara. *She will let us pass.*

"To where?" I asked.

Kloan pointed. "The root, Waythrel. Look!"

The gnarled stump glimmered. A sparkling dust spun about it, shattering the gloom of our environment. Thousands of opportunistic flying plants flooded the area, blinding us. Their forms were diverse and impossible to understand in these short sightings. Their biology was attuned to the dynamic light source captivating us.

I was underwhelmed. "*That* is Yakshini? It is a god? A root stub? A vegetable?"

Yes and no, came the thoughts of Vighneshvara. *She is a divinity; her physical raiment selected as a plant. The greatest tree and vine in the cosmos. A form she has held for so long it is likely she can no longer escape it unharmed. This is but a tip. Her roots dig through space and time. Each connects worlds, ages, deep into the forgotten past, far into the undreamed future. She extends her vascularity until the planets die in the ice of the final death.*

The air around the root knot warped. A fissure opened.

"I don't understand. What does this mean?"

Kloan smiled, childish awe on her face. "Life, Waythrel. So much life! One of the greatest and oldest sources of vitality in our universe. We found the outer shell of her web and will ride the roots to the core."

Ride the roots? To the core of what?

I had no time for my thoughts. A tunnel yawned before us, and a blast of swampy vapor bubbled. From the glowing tip protruding into this world, a gnarled shaft plunged into the depths and disappeared. Vighneshvara opened his wings and looped in the air. He angled us toward the fibrous mouth, his army of eyes focused forward. Curling my own eyestalks in panic, I glimpsed a last blur of the jungle as he dove along the root's path.

Chapter 55

We used to think that if we knew one, we knew two, because one and one are two. We are finding that we must learn a good deal more about "and."

Arthur Stanley Eddington

Light dimmed. The god slung us through the interdimensional passage. His glowing wings lit the impossible, interplanetary root. I cast eyes behind and saw the portal to the other world close. A disk of blue and green flared as darkness enveloped us. The fissure shrank and winked out of existence as we sped along the living cord.

The galactic growth continued through its hyperspace tunnel. We traced its preposterous length for several minutes at high speed. No true organism could maintain the necessary hydrostatic pressure on such scales. Plants could not fashion a wormhole, carve multiple doorways through space and time, or use those as a pandimensional horticultural matrix connecting uncounted worlds. My foundation as an educated citizen of the cosmos collapsed. A sense of profound

ignorance settled in my core. I knew nothing of the history and nature of our reality. I questioned the state of my own sanity.

While these thoughts stumbled through my mind, a bright disk appeared ahead. We burst into another world. Plant forms innumerable spanned my vision. Bizarre shapes, functions, colors, and texture. Most tended to a shade of dark blue, adapted to the starlight of whatever system we had entered. The tentacle of bark thickened as we traversed the wormhole. It erupted from the ground like a redwood tree and snaked toward a mass of vegetative material.

Vighneshvara spread his wings wide. We caught the planetary airs, gliding along the god-root as it plunged into thick forests. Ahead, the titanic vine scaled the sparser rise of a steep mountain. All was relative—this challenger to Everest exhibited plant growth rivaling the Amazon.

From multiple directions giant arteries converged on the prominence. We soared upward. Vighneshvara beat his glowing appendages. Clouds of water and floating vegetation passed alongside us.

A surreal botanic junction fused at the peak of the elevation. Six massive roots climbed the sides. Or rather, they extended down the slopes after splitting from a central node. The directionality was in reverse to our flight. I guessed what would happen next.

We hovered above the nodule, and it sensed our presence. A brilliant radiance shone from the bark. Once again, a tunnel into nothing and nowhere opened. This time it was far larger. The root diving into the emptiness assumed colossal proportions, beyond any plant life I had encountered.

We sailed into the portal, careening over the god's limb. Ferried by our divine butterfly, we were two parasitic mites stunned and astonished. The branch continued to thicken. When we burst from the wormhole into the orange light of yet another world, its growth had slowed. I corrected myself again. The direction of our journey biased my thoughts. The astral appendages sprouted from a source ahead. Their size *decreased* toward the worlds we had departed.

I will not repeat the similar crossings we made in this way. Planets numerous. Each devoid of an Orb and empty of intelligence, brimming with a vibrant ocean of unconscious vitality. We experienced blinding vistas of biology blurring beneath us. Our celestial chariot descended into ever-expanding excavations in spacetime. As we leapt through the final portal, we flew over an arm of bark and moss that was not believable. The vast vine entered into the realm of mythology. These isolated god-minds bent—and broke—all the rules of science.

We advanced along a giant vein dwarfed by still greater titans. It was one of millions diving into portals uncounted, rushing to worlds unseen. Carrying unfathomable masses of nutrients to fertilize networks of life across the universe.

The roots converged at a central core. The nexus possessed attributes of all the vegetative life I had witnessed in our journey. It embodied them in manners unique and profound. I could not call it a tree or any other name you might know. Such a petty term would distort the majestic nature of this goddess's incarnation.

Whatever label, it rested on the surface of an artificial environment. Forces unknown held together a bowl of organic material with the radius of a star system. A dizzying array of suns spun about the mass, colossal energy sources sustaining this impossible ecosystem.

Vighneshvara soared toward the god-plant. He climbed into the heavy atmosphere of this synthetic world. We approached a stratum of branches and leaves spanning a New Earth continent. Landing, we touched down close to the mammoth bulk of a main stem of the entity. Our ferryman folded his wings and bowed to the wall of unknowable vegetative hides.

"Yakshini," he whispered.

The surface rippled. The bark cracked and melted. Mountainous branches snapped and reformed. We suffered the unintended violence, the small encounter from the titanic. Sound waves pommeled us, wind brushing us to the edge.

A sphere with a radius of ten terran redwoods protruded from

the hulk. It took on features our limited forms could recognize. Humanoid, eyes of cellulose, a mouth of leaves, characteristics an odd superposition of humanity's peoples. I assumed the spectacle was intended for Kloan.

"Yakshini has heard the last call of Aditi," blasted gales of speech. "The Sleeping Mother gathers her brood. She requests the presence of Yakshini at the nexus in time. There the usurper-thief awaits with her infinite impostors."

Vighneshvara spread his arms and wings to the side as he lowered his head. "What is Yakshini's will in this?" he asked.

The plant face thundered. "Yakshini will heed the call. She will retract all life roots. Cast uncountable worlds to the darkness and wound Herself beyond repair. For a final battle. She wishes vengeance to crush the evil that has stolen everything from Her."

Chapter 56

We should not for a moment consider even our best-established knowledge of existence as true. It is awareness only of the colors that our own vision paints on the film of one bubble in one strand of foam on the ocean of being.

Olaf Stapledon

At this point, I feared I could no longer continue in this journey. We faced entities I could not apprehend. My mind constituted an atom of their whole. Yet time and again, they slandered Ambra and her Collective, casting her actions in the vilest terms.

The Orbs were guardians every Xix esteemed. We considered them ancient benefactors of all sentient life. But in the hands of these powers, they underwent a terrible transformation. Without exception, they had condemned all I had held dear.

Whatever the Daughter asked, or Kloan revealed in her metaphysical ramblings, it was too much for me. I did not have the

strength both to betray my dearest friend and forsake all I had believed to be true.

A fool, I challenged the gods.

"Is it mere jealousy that turns you all against her? Is it not the case that hundreds of deities have joined her, that their unions function on trust and love, on mutual respect? Do you refuse to join for pride or avarice? Are you unable to merge with her because your minds lack humility? Or affection?"

The plant-god focused its mind on me, freezing my thoughts in its attention. "Wayward Waythrel of Xix, how Yakshini nursed your forebears in the glassy sands! How She teased growth from a land hostile to everything that lives. A humble labor of eons in the parched and tortured dunes of your star-drenched world. With adoration, She tended the saplings. Guided their evolution. At last, they became and metamorphosed into the first nymphs of intelligence. How She loved you, dear children."

Shocked, I could not move. "What do you mean?"

"You have seen Her works! You have witnessed the abundance of life on myriad worlds. Life that was and is and will be planted and nursed by Yakshini. What more is there to understand?"

Enormous arms erupted from the trunk and surrounded us in an embrace. They halted meters from our bodies, caging us within.

The plant-goddess purred. "She is your Mother, Waythrel. The Mother of all Xix."

"*You?* You were the Gardener?" Would they invert everything?

"You exist because of Her," said Vighneshvara, his demeanor grave. His fiery eyes condemned my outburst.

It could not be. How could I know truth from falsehood in this place of gods, whose simplest thoughts burned my mind?

"The Orb. It has always been there. Did not the Sphere, did not Ambra, bring us to sentience?"

"The abomination was not always there," came the booming voice of the tree. Her arms withdrew and disappeared, absorbed into the bulk of the plant. "The limbs of Yakshini were there when the

usurper arrived. At the nascent budding of awareness in the new animals that had formed on your homeworld, darkness fell." The face contorted, and gloom choked the light. "The demon ball with its legions took Xix from Her. The hell-thing burned Her roots into the time corridors and back. Leaf and branch of Her body withered and perished on your world. The cursed god did what it would with your minds, but She wept childless and wounded."

"Why would she do this?" It was too horrible to contemplate.

"Because of arrogance. Because she claimed Yakshini could not nurse full and fruitful intelligence. Because she said the mother's role had been played and must be surrendered to her for the next step of evolution. Because the foul beast hungered to devour all consciousness."

"Was this true? Could you not do what she could?"

A hostile wind rocked my form.

"Who decides, worm? Who gave the thief such authority? Who owns the minds? The souls and thoughts born from the womb of another? What over-god does this thing declare itself to be to decide that the spirits cultivated by another are unfit to exist?"

Part of me realized my words were suicidal, but I said them anyway. "Ambra shepherded the psyches of millions of developing species and has preserved their consciousness at death! She has proven her worth! What have you done?"

"Aditi has Her nestlings, but they are few and scattered. The thief took the rest, violated Her very tissues in space and time. She stole untold numbers of children from their Mother. After countless battles lost and many deep injuries, Yakshini retreated to the worlds without minds. She kept them so, stifling sentience so the marauder would never steal them again."

The horrors of this cosmic conflict oppressed me. A wasteland of carnage. The god had engendered life across the cosmos. She aborted future intelligence because they would not remain hers.

I could still not let go of my beliefs. I lashed out in desperation,

my faith shaken. My foundations crumbled before this beautiful nightmare of life, consciousness, war, and loss.

"Have you saved any of the souls you have created?"

"Tell me Xix," the goddess boomed, "who decides they need saving, and how?"

"Can't you see, Waythrel?" said Kloan. "You helped create an angelic monster. An exquisite fiend all but the most indomitable temperament will love. Because she is lovable." She stroked my arm. "Nothing's ever as it seems. True affection doesn't dominate. The cosmos can't stand on a god-particle narrowly nucleated by one psyche. Where's the balance? They enact affectionate banditry and murder of the dreams and lives of others. Performed by an omnipotence convinced of its own righteousness."

She grasped my hands. "We *must* destroy her. *Undo* the asymmetry."

Nothing made sense. My thoughts spun in confusion. If their words had merit, they did not fit with what had taken us here in the first place. Ambra had initiated it. She had guided us, educated this cyborg, and prepped her for this cosmic quest. Why would she lay the groundwork for her own destruction? It was lunacy!

The titanic mouth spoke again. "You are a prisoner to her labyrinths of thought, as is this clone. We can see the singularity. We can see by means hidden in the discontinuity, she can destroy Ambra Dawn. This is why you are here."

"Me? Why?"

"Because you are nothing but the cell of a greater brain, and yet you aided the birth to this monstrosity. Your awareness and its patterns are etched throughout its structure. When you and the inverse reach the anomaly, all will be unmade."

My role was revealed at last. The confounding purpose for my consignment to this absurd, insane voyage uncovered. I was nothing more than a weapon, a foundation of cogitations they would use to unmake what I had helped design.

I had anticipated some terrible, murderous function for Kloan in all this. I had deduced it by direct observation of countless events in our recursive time trap. But I had never suspected I would *myself* be central to killing her whom I loved. My heart cracked, shattered shards of my soul cascading into the void.

"She whom you loved is no more, Xix," said Vighneshvara, appropriating my thoughts. Denying all dignity.

"You said you didn't understand how to destroy her. How do you know I am required?" I grasped for some hope of escape from this terrible sentence.

The giant god shook us again with words. "You speak rightly. We cannot see past the singularity, the fear that drives the other powers to flee. We do see into that horror in time. You are integral to its resolution—the unmaking of Ambra Dawn."

The daemon-moth turned his searing eyes to Kloan. "Your mind holds a map, a key—a path you believe will reach the nexus."

She nodded, turning away from me to face the deities. "They will defend. The devil ball is mighty beyond imagining. With enough of the gods, we can rend the mental superstructure. Rip through layers of minds and guards and open a broad shaft into the depths of the thing, to Ambra Dawn herself."

A thousand images flooded between her and the gigantic beings. I could process almost nothing of it.

"Yes," said Yakshini. "How came you to this when the celestials themselves could not see it?"

"She has trained me, guided me, tried to exploit me. I was close to her mind. I saw the way. Not at first, or she may have destroyed me. I could not understand it in the beginning. I do not fully grasp it now. I sense you do. You can use my thoughts."

The goddess hissed with ice. "Yakshini will hurt her, even as She dooms Herself. When Yakshini withdraws, oceans of worlds will cease to have ever brought forth life. The offender will lose souls innumerable, to a deep weakening of her power."

"Not enough," said Kloan.

"No," said Yakshini. "The other gods must come. Through the visions of your mind, they will puncture a passage through her walls. Deliver a poison to end her before she began."

Chapter 57

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Where is the way to the dwelling of light and where is the place of darkness?

The Book of Job

I felt sick. I fought to conjure images of Ambra as I had known her. Extract scarce, finite memories from the infinite layers of remembrance deposited over a concluded eternity. Moments when we had found her ravaged body on the smuggler's ship. Near death, her psionic potential released random bursts of power from a dying mind. I remembered her in the cell on Dram. Tears streaked her face. Incisions bleeding in her abdomen from their desecration of her flesh. The theft of her progeny, where the

doom of the universe to an unending supply of demonic clones was assured.

I recalled her soaring above the chaos of a nascent and naive consciousness as she steered us into the past. How she awakened and called forth the latent human Readers to rescue her planet. For hundreds of years together, memories. Always beside me. She became something beyond a friend—a soul as near to my own as could have been.

This talk of destroying her nauseated me. I could not tolerate another word spoken against her. Whatever she had become at my hands and others, crimes she had committed in their eyes, it was enough for me. My heart remained devoted to her—yes, including to obey her command to kill her. Let it stop there! No more words denigrating her image in my mind. No more bile and hate and acid thrown her way.

Kloan interrupted my raging thoughts and bowed before these spiteful divinities. "Now there's one last thing I must do."

Yakshini rumbled. "First Mother calls. She leads a multitude. It is time all the powers gathered."

"*All* of them, or what numbers you can bring," she added.

"We will call many," said Vighneshvara.

"Not enough of the greater gods." She turned to the plant deity. "You and Aditi are the first awakened, the mother-goddesses. Deepest, oldest, most profound titans of the cosmos. Your children, and the others that became—a number developed into transcendent beings. Terrible and broken, lost in their madness. Yet magnificent. I will summoned them."

The gargantuan butterfly faced toward her, a mountain towering over a small tree. Suspicion stained his speech. "Beginning now, you will follow the Life Giver and accompany her to the nexus. The lies of Ambra within you will not sabotage our plans."

"Let you fail? Why would I do that?" she said, addressing Yakshini. "We *need* Māra and her crazy clan. At the end of time, they have become a formidable host, a terrible army waiting."

Images of the ice world poured from her mind, and before them, the deities were silent for a time.

"At the end of time," echoed Vighneshvara.

"I've been there," Kloan said, pulling her hand out of her robe. A bright transcendence dispelled the gathered gloom. It bathed the gods in a radiation foreign to our universe. "The key is mine. I understand its use."

Yakshini spoke. "This disciple of the enemy is correct, but I detect deviousness within betrayal. It festers in her words and concepts. Ruses color and taint with the manipulations of Ambra Dawn. We dare not break her mind open and thereby risk everything."

Vighneshvara hissed. "It may not be necessary to fully break."

The ball blazed like a supernova. I cowered behind Kloan's shadow. My eyestalks retreated to the safety of my torso cone, my awareness blanked by the emissions bathing us. Before I hid, I heard the scream of the divine moth and glimpsed him cowering within his wings. Yakshini howled in protest.

The glow grew until it became more than light. Radiance molded into sound. It drowned the cries of others, even deities, flattening thoughts and emotions themselves. Through it all, Kloan's voice reverberated.

"Break me if you can, god-fools." A transcendental potency emanated from her words. "But leave me be to finish the task. I will bring back your wayward broods. I will thaw them from the cosmic permafrost."

An overpowering wind rose, circling like a cyclone. I struggled to unsheathe my eyes. I could no longer discern Yakshini or Vighneshvara. The whirlwind created a wall of debris of solid air. Branches, leaves, rocks, and dirt blasted past at supersonic speeds. I clung to Kloan's robes. My feet dug their digits into the remaining soil. I crouched low, my Xixian limbs allowing for my towering frame to bend below her head.

The tornado roared and strengthened, but she stood unmoving.

Her sparse hair whirled about her head, her arm raised, holding a blinding star. The world turned on its side, and the maelstrom of wreckage bent and focused above us. A vortex formed, another wormhole, and the turbulence poured into it. The ground rattled, tore and detached from the supporting branches. We blasted away and plunged headfirst into the chaotic whirlpool.

Chapter 58

I am the Self seated in the hearts of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings. With a single fragment of Myself I pervade and support this entire universe.

Bhagavad Gita

"I'm starting to like this thing," said Kloan as she rolled the dimming sphere between her hands. "Whew. That was a close one. Nearly lobotomized back there."

My eyestalks unraveled. We were back on the dead world. The crystal ball reached a nadir, but it cast the entire statued museum of gods in a false moonlight. I strained my eyes. Signs of the dome reappeared, encompassing the breadth of the deities as well.

She strolled to the plinth, the towering forms of Māra and her pack glaring down on us with loathing.

"See, they *know*, Waythrel. It's damned nigh impossible to fool big god-things. But Ambra is imposing and a thousand times more devious. I'm not sure how it would have gone otherwise. They

would've found out everything, but without understanding the need and the endpoint. They're so addicted to destroying *her*."

"I am again lost." I was too tired to offer anything else. I yearned for the warmth and love Ambra promised me. Or had I dreamed it? In another delusional trek from one more vanished chronology?

"Well, they wouldn't have let me leave with all their doubts. Worst-case scenario, I was going to go back to report their plans to the devil ball. Ha!" barked Kloan, placing the sphere into the bowl. "As if she hadn't orchestrated every last note! Can you call gods morons?"

Her earnest stare was beguiling. The artifact brightened, and the light distracted her.

"If I wasn't learning how to tap into the power of this thing, scrambled brains. I wouldn't have been able to create a wormhole they couldn't close."

"Ambra orchestrated? Are you on her side now?" Hope was not part of the question. I babbled through exhausted bewilderment.

"Poor Waythrel, you need a long sleep, one without any more nightmares. It's almost done. The last pieces nearly in place. Let's wake these bastards and seal the deal."

One by one, she walked the ring, touching the surfaces of the glass that was not silica, of the ice that was not water. I watched at a distance from the center of the circle beside the sphere. By each obscenity, she paused. Her hand rested on the rippling material. The light from the artifact cast its luminosity toward the appropriate tower.

Striding to the next, the monolithic form behind her would melt. The crystal dissolved like some molten steel and dripped to the frozen ground. The cryogenic tombs thinned enough to release their contents. Odd mixtures of smoke and luster, screams and mutterings, churned within my Reader senses. The awakening of tormented awareness. Those minds matured to their malicious and unfathomable natures. I cowered closer to the shining sphere.

Kloan completed the circumference and stepped back to the center of the god-ring. She watched the titans lumber from their cosmic coma. Horror crept through me as they emerged. Demonic personalities, their caustic essence stirred memories from terrible encounters. I prayed to Ambra that this mad cyborg could control them.

She lifted the diamond orb, and its radiance ripped through the air in front of us. The gods bent and shielded themselves from the awesome incandescence. At this moment, the ground shook. Previous recollections from this lifeless world reversed. Molten globules pushed their way out of the permafrost beneath us. Thousands of tongues of quicksilver, they sprinted toward a focal point. Behind her, they aggregated, self-assembled, and coalesced. The crystal guardian rose. The final fusion of the hulk snapped with a deafening crack. The retort echoed throughout the dome-encased atmosphere.

"Godlings!" cried Kloan. "It's time to reconsider my offer and join me at the singularity!"

The guardian rested immobile. The other titans shifted and strained through the brilliance. At last, the largest stepped forward. I recognized the form from my visions. Beholding the thing with open eyes, I knew these gods had been humbled. In a past so distant from this present as to be unreachable to Kloan's Reader powers, I would have perished to look on her. Now, I survived a weakened remnant brought low by the terrible tides of time. Still, she stood indomitable, defying the light. Smoke and magma boiled within her veins.

Māra.

She stopped in front of Kloan. "You have won, and I curse you for it. But forces greater than I have cursed you far more diabolically than I dream. I take that pleasure in bending my knee to you, insect. I know I help them bring your final destruction."

"Glad to see you, too, Māra," she said, a glint in her eye. "I assume you have these monkeys on their leashes?"

"If I didn't? Do you think they don't feel the foreign flame you brandish? Do they not see the thousand ice-blades of the giant behind you?"

The demon queen reared back and opened her mouth to the black heavens and screamed. Fire belched upward and rained hot coals. The cry was the sound of a million souls raked by a fiend's claws. The dome shattered at its apex. Flickering mats of a force field plunged to the ground and evaporated before our eyes.

"Have we not all perished everlastingly in these shells of stillness?"

Trembling, I continued to gaze skyward and watched the habitat heal itself. Kloan was unfazed.

"Good. They know what's coming."

Māra turned two flaming eye sockets toward us. "Do *you* know what approaches?"

Kloan winked at this nightmare from the deepest pit of the underworld. Her eyebrow arched, mock shock dancing over her features.

"Why in heaven or hell would I want to ruin *that* surprise?"

Chapter 59

I hope that when the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief, because there will be so much to look forward to.

Donnie Darko

A deep plane of sand surrounded us. For a moment, I dared to hope we had been transported to Xix. The thought of my homeworld was comforting in the chaos of this displacement.

The sands were wrong, the silica of a different composition, granularity, and color. A brief glance to the sky dispelled all desperate notions of home. The heavens roiled in radiant patterns intricate and hallucinogenic. We were not on any world in any possible space of our universe.

Scanning the horizon, the full truth stunned me. Rising to the deranged firmament was an artificial tower tens of thousands of feet. It ended in a point that drank the clouds swirling about it. At the base of this grand spire was a small habitat. Its buildings I recognized. Within its walls, I had passed decades on a resurrected world.

"Kloan, what is this place? It is not New Earth, and yet it is."

She gazed over the sands, pleased. "She draws us into herself."

"Where are we?"

"Temple City. In the desert itself. Have you forgotten your own final plan? The detachment of the Dish from the Sahara that would travel through the cosmos?"

"I had imagined something different. What has happened to the sky?"

"The fires of creation filtered through the light of uncountable souls."

"More mysticism," I whispered in frustration.

"No, Waythrel. You often confuse reality and metaphor. Right now, my words are literal."

"This," I said, dismissing her impossible sentences, "was to be a starship grounded in rock."

"A god-shard. Part of what happens when you play with divine fire, my Xix."

God-shard. The word sent tremors through me. "Where are the other divinities?"

"Delayed," she said, crouching into a ball and placing the glowing sphere on the sands.

She rose and turned to face me. "Everything's most bent as we approach her—space and time. Expected. So, the short delay I placed between our travels becomes much longer for us here."

"Why have you impeded them?"

She grasped her robes near her neckline. "Because we need to talk, Waythrel. This is it. Time to lay all the cards on the table."

The weariness burdening me deepened. "Kloan, I am not at any table. I have never understood the game. I do not hold a single card."

"Sit with me a minute," she said, gesturing to the grains. "Before all the fools return."

I had no objection to lowering my body to rest on sand. *How I missed it.* We sat, and I tried to prepare myself for more revelations. It was fitting she had saved the most absurd of them for last.

"Remember the riddle in the crypt? 'Where are all the anti-gods?'"

"Of course."

"You asked why it was so important to Ambra that you find that solution?"

"Yes." As always, I did not have a clue where she was going. Anxiety chilled me.

"I told you then I didn't know the answer. Well, I lied." She stared at me, nonchalant in her confession.

"I see. So why did she put so much effort into that test?"

She frowned. "Let's start the explanation with another question. We've been carrying these strange coatings over our bodies for some time. Through perpetual event loops, on world after tree root, adventure after child murder. We don't notice them anymore, but they're *still* here. *Why?* What are the fields, Waythrel? Why are they here?"

She was right. I had adapted to the miraculous things. I ignored them to focus on the disturbing events demanding my full attention. I considered her query, retreating to earlier, unproven theories I had formed.

"Environmental suits. Disguises. Like the sphere. Magical gifts from the gods for mythical heroes to complete their legendary quest."

Kloan dismissed my ideas with a wave of her hand. "No, those functions were secondary." She grasped my digits and gazed into my eye clusters. "Waythrel, have you ever touched me?"

What was she talking about? "Yes, of course. I am touching you now. I have carried you, tended you, grabbed you in frustration, tried to stop you, save you."

"Always *through* the fields."

My mind spun around this point. "You are correct. What are you implying?"

"You've never *touched* me. Your atoms have never been *allowed* to approach mine, to interact."

A strange feeling spread through me, a deep unease. "Why has it not been permitted?"

"It's always hardest to explain something to you Xix when you don't want to know the answer. *Think!* You asked if the use of robots and other machines on the clone colony was to protect the Anti from annihilation. I told you they're unconcerned with it. You asked why, but I never answered you. You asked an important question! Indeed, how could they not be concerned?"

I did not respond. She had seen through me. I did not want to think anymore in this direction.

"You can hide from it all you want, Leaky, but you sense the truth. So I'll cut this short and say it. They didn't fear annihilation from those clones and humans because they *wouldn't hurt them*. Because the cyborgs and handlers, the world itself and everything on it, are made of antimatter as well." Her eyes bored into mine. "The only foreign matter in all those visits was *you*, Waythrel."

"No. It is impossible."

How ridiculous. Of course, it was not possible. How could there be anti-people? Where would they come from? The implications were astounding and devastating.

"They came from dedicated and advanced engineers," she said. "Look at it this way. The Anti had millions of years to face a universe inherently, *existentially* hostile to them. Enough of that and there can be certain breathtaking feats of ingenuity. They discovered relationships between matter and antimatter surpassing all science in the cosmos. All from a unique need to understand this unbalanced, broken symmetry in our reality."

She ran her hands through the sand, scooping grains and letting them rain over her feet.

"Early on, they thought entropy was the ultimate weapon. They'd use it to unmake substance and return balance to reality. Plans changed with the power of the clones over spacetime. They had the tools they needed for something a little more interesting and wild. Cue several monumentally disastrous failures. One threatening the entire existence of their kind. At last, they succeeded."

My mind numbed. Instinct had me moving away from her. I struggled to speak.

"Succeeded at what?"

"Material *inversion*. Consumed horrific amounts of energy, so they had to pick carefully. Choose the most potent tools. A complete flip of the matter of your type into its opposite."

"Matter of my type."

"Yes," said Kloan, her green eyes like lasers burning into my cowering eyestalks. "*Your* type. Because once they had perfected the process, they created millions of human anti-people. No different in their physiology and chemistry than their inverses. Of course, they didn't stop there. They *cloned* from them. Clones from specific inverted stock. Gave birth to tiny little anti-Ambra Dawns."

She grinned. "Like me."

Chapter 60

Is man merely a mistake of God's?
Or God merely a mistake of man?

Friedrich Nietzsche

Faint gusts stirred the sands while my mind juggled a pack of impossibilities.

We stood on a *god-shard* ripped from the heart of a world and suspended at the root of time, dangled over a cauldron of energy and dragon fire that was the nativity of our reality. Revelations spilled from a cyborg child, a genetic duplication of my dearest friend, who happened to be the savior or damnation of the universe.

Opinions differed.

At this moment, I struggled to grasp that my messianic mimic was made of antimatter.

"So the fields—" I stuttered, lurching to a stop as my mind sputtered.

"Prevent us from annihilating each other. Detonating like an angry hornet's nest of thermonuclear warheads."

"You are composed of antimatter."

"Well, what's anti and what isn't is sort of relative, don't you think?" she chirped. "But I'll give it to your kind. You own this cosmos, and we're the losing minority. So I'll be *anti*. For now. Until we rebalance, because that's at the root what this is about."

"Balancing substance and its inverse?"

"Among other things."

I stood, my mind racing. "If what you say is true about yourself and your...*type*...if you can restore particle balance, it is a disaster to do it!"

"We *can* do it—you, me, and Ambra, with a little help from our god friends."

My arms windmilled. "Even if we *can*, it is madness. It would mean total material annihilation!" I paused, my imagination spinning wild scenarios to ground sanity in this tale. "Unless you intend to do this after a substantial expansion in the universe? To segregate matter and antimatter across vast distances, render them innocuous?"

"Nope! See the sky? That's Big Bang fireworks. We've come to the beginning, and we're going to break the asymmetry at the alpha point."

"To what purpose? You will destroy the cosmos."

"Yes!" she cried to the frothing firmament, raising her hands into the air. She lowered her arms, her face turning somber. "Well, no, actually. There are more things in heaven and beyond it, Waythrel, than are dreamt of in your particle physics."

"I will not participate in such madness."

She clucked like an annoyed mother hen. "Listen. Simplistically, matter and antimatter annihilate and make a big bunch of energy. Scrambles the structure of stuff, all you love and want to preserve in the universe. But what of gravity, Xix? What of space and time? More to the point, what of the field of sentience interwoven with them? Augmented to complexities unfathomable in these gods?"

"What does this have to do with particle annihilation?"

"What do you think anti-thoughts are like?"

The question stopped my mind cold. "I do not know. The chemistry of antimatter, its biology, neurobiology, they should be the same as ours."

"Should? You doubt. Why?"

The answer dragged itself from sleep. "Because chemistry is different from gravity. Distinct forces. Divergent physics."

"Yes, and?"

"And I do not know how particles compare to their inverses when considering sentient fields."

Kloan stood and slapped my arms, dust clouding the improbable air. "Exactly. You're right to be unsure. While they're indistinguishable at most levels, they *diverge* in remarkable states. Think about classical and quantum mechanics or relativity. *Extreme conditions*. Super small. Ultra-fast. You need *new* laws of nature."

She pointed to the sands. "Inside this time-shard, entombed in a warped, murdered spacetime, is a god-thing. An intelligence of power and complexity we'll never begin to understand in science or intuition. How extreme do you think that is?"

She led me forward like a nymph. "Radical," I said.

"It turns out minds and their inverses diverge at those levels. *So think!* While the divinities grew, their sentience became more biased along a particular divergence. Our universe is dominated by one type of mentality. The broken symmetry in matter gave birth to an acute asymmetry in *consciousness.* So, where *are* the anti-gods, Waythrel? Do you see why this is so important?"

"Do we need the other types of cognition?"

Kloan spread her arms wide. "Does the cosmos look like it's particularly sane?"

"How could I judge?" This I meant with the deepest sincerity.

Her hands clasped themselves together at her breast. "How can *you* judge?" She hugged me, resting her intubated head on my torso. "Oh, Waythrel. This is going to be a rough day. Look. We've let our

universe destroy half of what it could be. In atoms and in consciousness. We can't understand what it might be if we were to restore balance. Dare we allow this mental genocide—what the Anti call the *nousicide*—to continue?"

The idea *my type* of substance exterminated entire cosmic ecosystems of thought disoriented me. Yet, in some strange sense, I felt it. A monolithic conformity in the strangeness of mind and matter pummeled me in this quest. Kloan's wild, incomprehensible words rang through my memories.

Macrocosms where the laws of physics are weird. Where mathematics doesn't add up. Where logic is illogical.

"You said I would never understand you, and this was important," I said.

"Yes. So you see it."

"No, Kloan, I do not. I still cannot comprehend how annihilating the universe saves your kind of mentality. Everything will be destroyed, nonexistent anti-gods included."

She shook her head and took my hands again. "Waythrel, it's more than particles, remember? At the extremes, the minds are different. *Mentalities diverge!* They don't annihilate—they intertwine, synergize. They couple and engender. They *create*!"

"We're going to grind up all the matter in the cosmos into energy, destroy every last world and galaxy and god. Including Ambra. Yet some manner of grand mental something is going to be born?"

"Yes!" she said, dancing in a circle like some psychotic nature spirit.

I gazed to the boiling heavens. At any moment, a thousand deities would descend. I tried to focus, to center myself, to find a single, practical thing I could grasp in all this.

"Kloan, I am here because I love her."

She skipped to me, beaming. Her green eyes gleamed, her teeth bright in the hideous illumination.

I touched her violated head with my digits. "And I am here because I love you, too, although if I cannot fathom you. I do not

have anything more to add. It is all beyond me. Tell me why, after all this, you both need me here? What do you want with me?"

Her smile vanished. She set her jaw. "The gods come to tear open the universe and reveal Ambra. When the moment comes to destroy her, you will pass sentence, Waythrel. You're the chosen one."

I stepped backward, away from the words I was hearing, dealt a cataclysmic blow.

Kloan ignored me, declaring my doom in some resonant, prophetic voice. "She has selected you to be the final judge of our cosmos. And I agree with her."

Chapter 61

It is enough to have been created, to have embodied for a moment the infinite and tumultuously creative spirit. It is infinitely more than enough to have been used, to have been the rough sketch for some perfected creation. Looking into the future, I saw without sorrow, rather with quiet interest, my own decline and fall.

Olaf Stapledon

"You are not serious."

Of every absurdity I had heard from her mouth, proclaiming Waythrel of Xix the judge of all the universe was without doubt the most ludicrous of them all.

"Here's how it's going to work," said Kloan, speaking past me. "Remember when I said I had to become everything Ambra was not? Her inverse in all things? Now you can understand. Physically, I am close to her opposite. A pile of cloned antimatter to annihilate her. Boom!"

She slapped her hands together, startling me.

"More important is my mental superstructure. Her antipode in

the realm of sentience. As an anti-clone, I'm much of the way there already. I had to perfect the distinctions. Deepen, strengthen our differences by getting to know her beyond her talking god-ball. Hence, our adventures, of which you were a critical element."

"I do not want explanations. I cannot do this thing, Kloan. Even if it were possible, I will not pronounce judgment on an entire reality."

She continued. "She is the primordial fault. The fatal flaw. The imperfection seeding a time-transcending divinity. It stained the continuum through her unique persona, a systematic bias. She is wrong in and of herself and also askew because she is a construct of the dominant form of matter."

She removed her robes, her naked body gleaming with sweat in the desert heat. She walked past me to the bright sphere, stopping beside it.

"I am the surgical knife to remove her from the god-particle. When I collide with her, time and space will dive into themselves as never seen. We will enter the singularity of the Origin. We will annihilate each other there, the process altering everything from genesis to apocalypse. We'll recombine to create something far greater, completely *other*. A phenomenon unknowable to us in this distorted universe." Tears dripped from her eyes as she gazed at me. "It will be your choice whether to send me to this end."

"Kloan, no. *Stop!* I refuse!" My mind panicked.

"Waythrel, there are no more outs. The gods are psychotic. The continuum is sick with a mental plague. You've seen its dying gasps in the dead ice and darkness. We need to act."

"My soul is a nymph. I am only a Xix. Waythrel. Incapable of condemning a single consciousness. I cannot judge a cosmos."

She placed her hands on her bony hips. "Developmental biology, Leaky. There are decision points affecting the large-scale nature of an organism. Left-right asymmetry, top-bottom polarity, immunological reactivity. Malignancy. Junctions exist involving single tissues, including individual cells or the state of one protein in the cyto-

plasm. Reductionist events reverberate through the anatomical hierarchy to induce macroscopic ends."

Sonic booms shattered the relative quiet of the desert. I trembled in deep dread as a thousand blazing meteors exploded miles above us.

Kloan followed their trajectory toward the ground without interrupting her lecture.

"You've been chosen to select the direction of this universe. It's Ambra's will. Use the sphere. Push me forward in the null field that comes. Annihilate us both and engender something truly transcendental!" She frowned. "Or fail to—from choice or inaction. The vectors collapse on themselves. The gods continue their futile cosmic wars. Potential forever frozen in a development that never transcends this reality. Assure the everlasting winter."

Beyond my worst nightmares, the horror rooted me to the sand, straight like a beam. Eyestalks coiled in a braid. Arms wrapped as a shroud around my torso. I trembled as deities plummeted toward us, harbingers of catastrophe. Their fire and smoke heightened the aura of final cataclysm paralyzing my thoughts.

I could find no words to speak, not even of protest or anger. I could see no pathway out of this entangled causality caging my fate. Instead, I saw the two horns of a dilemma. The human mythic creature charging, the spearpoints sharp and deep. On one or the other I would impale myself.

"It's time," she said. "The circus is in town. Soon we dig, my travel mate. Take a last savage journey together to the end and beginning of all things nothing'ed."

The tips of my stalks turned eighteen eyes in circumference. Mesmerized, I gawked. One flaming comet after another struck the desert. Each impact induced a shockwave of sand and rush of air, cratering the surface. An incongruity of forms slammed like marbled towers onto the god-shard, unshaken and mighty, divinities so vast the paltry space dared not hold them.

Yakshini unfurled roots hundreds of miles across the terrain. Bark coated the sands like a carpet. Aditi spilled like liquid soot to

form first a dry lake, morphing to sphere resembling a caged gas giant. Elegant Vighneshvara floated with his eye-wings of light. Māra and her crew of hellions assaulted the ground simply by touching it. Thousands of others. Some greater, some lesser, all forces of physicality and mentality overwhelming me.

They formed a transcendental ring of divinities. At the center, Kloan radiated like some impossible ingot in the deepest furnace. Transfigured, an alien potency coursed through her cells. Her skin burned star-bright and blinding, unbearable. She raised her arms. A voice resounded across the shard. A mystical power imbued her once-childlike tones.

"This is the nexus. Here is the nucleus of all to be unmade. Feel her throb beneath. Taste her living blood and tissue. Deconstruct the labyrinth of minds and fortifications between us."

The resplendent shape spun in a circle. The shadows shone with a fantastical splendor.

"We turn downward, burrow as sharpened augers into the finite flesh of this fiend. You know your task. Open a shaft deep to the core. I will step into this abyss and fall, carrying the seed of her destruction."

They required no war speech. The deities dug. Nightmarish transformations of form into function manifest. They clothed themselves in hellish shapes. Serrated, bladed bodies. Hammering instrumentation. Possessed of hardness and sharpness little about matter and far more about soul. Abominations sliced through the surface and underlying matrix. The sounds were not of metal on stone or steel on flesh. The cause was not vibrational or from the impact of the debris flung into the skies.

No. What I heard over everything else blocked out the material events. The anguished wails of souls torn apart, of minds ripped to madness. What I saw was the desecration of inconceivable grace and beauty. The defilement of the pure and inviolable.

I witnessed the exalted, transcendent glory we called the Orb

broken. Its many-splendored passageways of light extinguished. Its visage of love and empathy marred and mutilated.

The screams engulfed me. These god-fiends rent and shattered all I had ever worshipped and adored. The cries buffeted me, hurled me prone, and drowned me in lunacy and sorrow.

In a pit of darkness, wailing, gnashing of teeth and claws pummeled my awareness. Until at last, in the center of the deepest nothingness, the sole scream left in my mind was my own.

Chapter 62

Perhaps our role on this planet is not to worship God—but to create Him.

Arthur C. Clarke

My scream perished in vain, abandoned by existence itself. The cosmos. The gods in their terrible grandeur. The shard of New Earth. The tattered remnants of the Orb—all vanished.

I floated in a darkness empty of a lack of light. A true unexistence indescribable by positive or negative, by presence or absence. In the reality I knew, even the vacuum teemed with a heavy broth of virtual particle pairs.

Not so here. No terms or thoughts are available for the existentially void, the authentically vacant. The experience was a psychosis with the form of Kloan anchoring my awareness.

Look down the shaft into the heart of divinity, came her words.

So I gazed as the nothingness heaved. Outside our bubble of emptiness, the cosmos warped and curved. Space and time were strained, perverted to a tortured malformation. At the deepest pit of this hellhole was a simple room containing a slab of machinery and living tissue. A human girl, sliced open and embedded in circuitry for the span of a universe. Undying and unassuaged in her agony.

Ambra smiled from below. Her green eyes were broad and inviting. Waveforms of purpose and affection rocking us on a sea of distraught lucidity.

Make the choice, came the thoughts of my dearest friend.

The anti-cyborg palmed the dazzling sphere in luminous hands. She held it beside me.

Time to decide, Waythrel.

A million journeys of nothing. Deaths and lives and pain and love and madnesses. A tsunami of experience casting me before it like unregarded debris. An eon of powerlessness and confusion. After all this, *I* was to seal the ultimate fate of our reality. I had no time for last words with Ambra or Kloan. I had no chance to examine her mutilated flesh and consider my own culpability, to judge my own life and choices.

I was too busy judging a universe.

I tried to parse the long and cryptic explanations, the deranged prophecies of the god-girl and her clone. I struggled to understand this terrible synergy of structure and evolution, the climb toward divine consciousness, and how it went awry. I failed to grasp how I could reboot reality by hurling an antimatter mimic of my friend into this deity-pit to annihilate her inverse cyborg. Incompatible thoughts spun incongruously in my mind and failed to harmonize.

I abandoned the effort. It surpassed me. Instead, I held the eyes of Kloan. I witnessed a terrified determination eliciting waves of empathy. I wanted to comfort this child who displayed such courage and commitment to her beliefs, despite those convictions harboring insanity indescribable.

I gazed down the deep shaft, the contortions of spacetime acting

as a lens. They brought the face of Ambra Dawn alongside her mirrored double. Eyes and anti-eyes of green. Eyes in agony and filled with love. Eyes of beings sacrificing beyond the capability of spirits to assimilate. Paired souls asking me to use each to destroy the other to realize a hypothesized and incomprehensible healing of a broken continuum.

It was a reprisal of my choices on the burning colony world when I carried Kloan through the gate. This time, the stakes were infinitely higher. Instead of saving her from a certain death on a dying planet, I was to cast her to destruction. In this one decision I would murder them together and, they both claimed, consume an entire cosmos.

Until all is lost, nothing is found.

For the first time, I appreciated the full import of the statement. I placed the digits of my arms on the sphere, touching Kloan's fingers. The brightness intensified, yet angled backward through the child. It extended down the shaft and into the heart of the darkness below. It washed the medical facility housing Ambra in a hideous, pure light of a distinct reality.

I don't have any reasons, my friends. I don't want to lose you. All I have is my love and my trust in you. I will give you what you ask for, although it is beyond my understanding.

Kloan smiled, tears in her eyes. *Seems that this is our last dance together, Xix.*

I pushed. Thrusting my arms forward with all my strength, I shoved the sphere and cyborg away from me. My inconsequential motion propelled me backward relative to the strange gravity lens below.

She accelerated with an unstoppable force I ascribed to the artifact. Collecting frightening momentum, her form and the small star sped down the tunnel. The distance deepened, unbridgeable, her approach to last an eternity.

The alien light of the globe turned from white to a burgundy. The sack of emptiness ripped and dissolved. It revealed the inner layers of hell itself. Sights impossible to convey with any accuracy.

The massacred forms of minds and machines. Bodies of Readers eternal, now dead. The blood-soaked claws and mouths of gods dripping.

Celestials clung to the sides of an inconceivable breach in spacetime like bats to a cavern wall. They scrambled, fleeing from the core, their cries wild and horrific. Backward I floated, yet the deities slid oppositely, clawing at the shriveling skin of a universe. An irresistible chain clasped them, dragging divinities deeper into the dying Orb's well.

The wailing death notes of innumerable Orb minds shattered my awareness. Countless more from the doomed god-things pierced me as they lost their grasp. One by one, they plummeted into the pit of mutating incandescence. Endlessly they fell. The lesser gods, Vighneshvara with his wings shredded and useless. Māra eviscerated and dissolving while torn apart by gravitational tides. Aditi spilling in submission. Yakshini splaying forth ten million roots like grappling hooks, landing punctures in spacetime, small breaches in the walls of the chasm, holding on longest until every branch snapped. At last, she slipped, screeching, into the abyss devouring them all.

I continued to drift backward, a shell of nothingness forming around me once again. The singularity sucked the tempestuous soup of creation. The universe fell into the pit with the gods. I could see each one as in slow motion. They tumbled through molasses. The lens warped and rendered the entire blender undecipherable.

An impossible emanation, divine and unmaking, erupted from the chaos. It rushed toward me. The closer it came, the faster it neared, my glacial movements soon to be overtaken. I had no illusions about what would happen when I met that ultimate radiance.

I suffered no anxiety, no feelings of panic or fear, and no thoughts for my continued existence. Acceptance and a weariness rendered all else secondary. I was ready for rest. I was more than ready for an end.

I opened my arms and eyestalks to the onrushing brilliance. As it blinded me, burned me, and tore my fragile flesh apart, I encountered

its mind. A transcendent personality burst through my evaporating consciousness. For one brief instant I could not keep, I understood what Kloan and Ambra had been trying to explain.

I wrapped my dissolving limbs around the light in a final, loving embrace.

I AM

Epilogue

I had glimpsed, in the very eye of that splendor, strange vistas of being; as though in the depths of the hypercosmical past and the hypercosmical future also, yet coexistent in eternity, lay cosmos beyond cosmos.

Olaf Stapledon

I was called Waythrel of Xix, but I no longer know what I am or what I should be named.

Gazing over this endless desert, such trivialities cease to hold consequence. Dune crests rise to the horizon, and a reddened star sets the landscape to fire as it plunges into a sea of sand.

I am happy in this place, freed of a need for the fading memories of a home I knew as Xix. The cosmic conflicts and metaphysics interest me in passing. Here on this unknown world, in an unnamed universe, I am comfortable. I am satisfied. I know a peace unlike any I can recall. I am ready to say goodbye to you.

You have questions, I realize. You want to know "what happened" to your cosmos. To Ambra and Kloan. To the legions of

broken gods. To the divine plan over which some unfortunate being I remember to be myself adjudicated.

I cannot blame you. After all you have come through with me, it is right I give you a response.

My honest, heartfelt answer to these queries is that I do not know.

This does not mean I do not possess memories, or rather fantastic hallucinations still dancing in my deepest dreams. Visions no doubt warped and xixomorphized into digestible, cognitive clumps compatible with my sanity and self-analysis. Behold the masticated nuggets I can offer you. I will try to capture them within the writing system of this Earth language. However vain, I do feel I owe you this effort.

You should never imagine they are something like "truth." Or "untruth." To lie requires knowledge of what *is* true, and I am lacking any such sense. What you have instead, let me state, is *myth*, cast from the furnace of the delusions of Once Waythrel of Xix. I have nothing more to give.

And so, what happened?

I died in our unmade cosmos. Every molecule in my body split apart. The atoms broken asunder into constituent quarks and strings. The dissolution downward through an infinity of ever-shrinking and changing microconstituents.

Concurrently, impossibly, like some pile of organic bricks, I was reassembled into something preeminent. What this thing was, I cannot say. It was greater than the collective spirits, the petty divines of our fractured continuum, and the Orbs. It surpassed these elevated entities like the deities transcended the individual minds comprising them. I do not know what this entity was any more than one mind of a group could know the whole. The gods themselves could not have understood it.

You might consider it God. It was a single Being—a unified, undivided, yet uncountable diversity where the mathematics of

summation was one. It strode the heavens and beyond as only the Almighty could do. You may wish to call it God.

I will not. I refuse because I glimpsed through its eyes. What I saw was humbling—certainly for myself, as has been every step of my journey. However, I mean humbling for the god-thing.

Through its gaze, I did not condescend from some ultimate vantage point, a Maker ruling over its creation. Instead, my focused exploration was upward, further, into a resplendent infinity of universes carpeting a greater heaven. In this place, God was not even a god, but one particle in a transcosmic assembly. A transcendent-maker-divine-particle, encompassing everything of our imaginings of religion and science. Yet nothing of the infinitely preeminent possibilities outside and remote.

I drowned in an ocean of god-atoms. A sea of creations as different from each other as a collection of elementary particles. Immeasurably more so. At this level of synthesis, diversity increased. My awareness could not comprehend the inexhaustible well of properties characterizing any given cosmos. Kloan had warned me, and I laughed in the midst of soul-shattering awe. In most of the realities at this hypercosmological strata, two plus two was anything but four.

If what I had described were the full story, it would be astonishing beyond measure. But the wonders only began with these vistas. In the same way protons, neutrons, and electrons are not the complete narrative of matter, so the infinity of god-particles did not preside over their dominion in isolation.

Subject to unknown properties of the Ultimate, they were driven to transcosmological physics, chemistry, analogs of biology, neurobiology, and more that were nothing at all like those paltry conceptions. I dreamed in my delirium that uncountable elements following innumerable and indecipherable rules associated, combined, interacted, and created, yet higher order agglomerations eclipsing the impossible syntheses I had witnessed to this point.

On and above, surpassing and superior, the structures assembled. In the cognitive fever possessing me, it became more than what my

experience could assimilate. Like Icarus, I was burned to devastation by the light of this geometric expansion of synergy.

In the final moments of this meditation, the endless, divine ladder shattered. My concentration broke. I dropped into deep darkness.

I woke here, in the sands of a warm and habitable world. Resurrected and recreated. I opened my eyes, not knowing what I was or how I could be. Most remarkable of all, when I woke, I was not alone.

It is because of this last fact that I must leave you now and end this wondrous speculation. The hour is late. The colder night airs will soon arrive, and I will retreat to the warmth and protection of the oasis behind me.

I gaze down at the infant in my arms. At three months, her thick, scarlet hair is still short and spiky. Her skin is a luminous white, painted from the captured light of the planet's moon. Any moment, she will awaken, hungry. Her emerald eyes will pierce my clusters with the unique survival demands of the human nymph-form. Once again, I will shelter beside the miraculous plants oozing milk and honey.

I stride across the sands, savoring the flow of silica between my digits. My emotions rise at a silhouette before me in the growing darkness. The star has set and its radiance faded, but the oasis provides its own glow with a plethora of bioluminescence. It catalyzes a gleam in the phosphorescent patterns on the shadow alongside the garden's edge.

"Synphel." I use one of my free arms to caress my mate's eyestalks.

"You are late, Waythrel. He is awake."

I glance down to her lower limbs. Cradled in one of them as by a hammock, a small bundle coos. I brush the thick black hair out of his eyes while he sucks on his thumb.

"Just in time, you mean. Ambra is also waking."

The redheaded baby twists and begins to complain. I bring the

two of them close together. The boy taps on Ambra's arm, and she stops crying.

A warm joy flows outward from Synphel. "Nitin can always soothe her."

"Yes," I say, feeling the wind stir. Its caress is the whisper of a distant friend. "I still think of Kloan."

"It is natural."

"Do you suppose she exists?"

"We know little, and our fulfillment is here. Perhaps her role lies elsewhere in this new creation, in a separate space with a purpose for her own completion."

"I hope so. She, too, is a daughter of time."

I peer into the oasis entrance. A soaring arch of trees and vines serves as a portal in an otherwise impenetrable fence of towering plants. I stroke Synphel's arm and turn toward the glow within.

"Come, let us go inside. It is time."

Gratitude is given for this worship which You are pleased to accept from our hands, even though You are surrounded by Angels: six-armed, many-eyed, singing the victory hymn, "Holy, holy, holy Queen of Hosts, who was and who is and who is to come! Hosanna in the highest."

from the Dawnist Anaphora

Afterward: Maker

Truth is a pathless land.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

When I began this series (then only conceived as a single novel), I wanted to write a "superheroine" book for my (then) middle school-aged daughters, the story of a "girl that saves the universe." What began as something with a strong YA flavor in the initial drafts, quickly turned darker. In addition, the ideas percolating in the first novel, *Reader*, cried out for a follow-up. Hence, *Writer* and *Maker* were conceived.

With this trilogy, I was interested in exploring certain themes and ideas from a variety of science fiction authors and modern cosmology, trying to find my own "mythology" to harmonize some of the disparate conceptions of reality percolating through human discourse. Ideas surrounding the subjectivity and limitations of human perception and understanding played important roles, as did ideas of causality, time, superstructure, divinity, and infinity.

Whereas *Reader* was written very organically (and metamor-

phosed from a YA novel to something quite different), and *Writer* written following a detailed outline, *Maker* was a strange synthesis of the two. A convoluted flowchart of the various time loops that characterize the first half of the novel was supplanted by a completely unplanned stream-of-consciousness climax that led to a fixed narrative point: the resolution to the wild story of Ambra Dawn that was envisioned several years before when I completed the final draft of *Reader*.

Once again I changed the narrator for the novel, in this case the story told through the voice of the alien Waythrel of Xix. A further challenge to myself and the reader is the ever recession of Ambra Dawn in the story. Waythrel's near constant companion in the novel is instead the enigmatic Kloan, a biological replica of Ambra Dawn, modified by the biomedicine and cybernetics of the dark Anti, who kidnapped the alien in *Writer* and leads her on a harrowing and confusing cosmic quest. Ambra returns in strange and punctuated events in the novel, in multiple different forms from infant to cosmic goddess. But there are few extended engagements with the Daughter of Time as in the previous books.

By far the most esoteric of the three, *Maker* cannot help but ultimately fail, just as any effort to produce an artistic impression of ultimate reality would fail. But I didn't seek to succeed in the impossible, but rather to wade into the chaotic paradox of mind and matter and metaphysics in the context of a thrilling narrative. For those who require coherence, realism, techno-science fiction, or a linear narrative, among other things, *Maker* has been at best a frustrating read. And that's okay. It was meant to be in some ways. That others have found it also inspiring and moving, thought-provoking and unique, is a success with profound meaning for me.

My creative activities have certainly tested the patience of many in my small circle of life. While such efforts are not necessarily to the taste of everyone, for those who have shown me grace and support, my heartfelt thanks are due and I gladly give it.

I am also touched by the readers and reviewers who have

expressed such affection for one (and sometimes several!) of the novels of this trilogy, especially those who have responded with feelings and ideas that reflect in some deep way those elements within myself that engendered this series.

This tale was bigger than any one character, perspective, or voice; and while part of the divergence between novels was intentional to shake both the writer and the reader out of their comfort zone, the larger truth is that the voices of the characters came and spoke to me in the manner recorded, and I simply wrote down what they said.

It has been difficult to leave Ambra, Nitin, Waythrel, Kloan, and their unique universe behind. They occupied my thoughts for a decade, sharing with me their stories and impressing their experiences deeply within me. I already miss them—Kloan, perhaps, most of all.

I hope that in some other reality, their memory is eternal, and we might meet again.

Erec Stebbins

Acknowledgments

Love is not a reaction. If I love you because you love me, that is mere trade, a thing to be bought in the market.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

I would first like to thank Ambra, Nitin, and Waythrel, without whom these novels would not have existed. That they chose me as the writer to tell their impossible story is humbling and touching. I have done my best to tell it right, but know that I have failed in the ways they convey in the text. Forgive my limitations, my dear friends, and I hope we meet again outside my head.

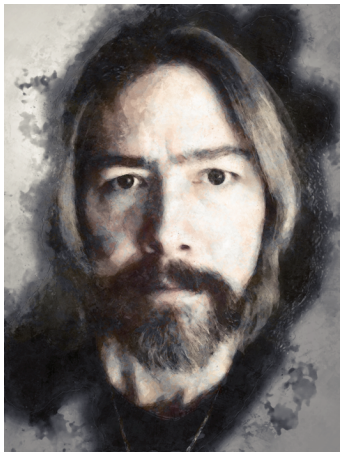
Thanks to those who supported the writing of the books during my self-publishing years. I had faint hope this odd narrative would interest many, and the failure of my first published thriller to sell convinced me (and publishers) that I was not marketable. During those years it was a struggle to put down the words that compose this trilogy. My deepest gratitude to those who instead provided encouragement.

And lastly, for those who are not with me, your love, your dreams, and your spirit will always be. If not in this life, or this world, perhaps in others, amongst other stars and innumerable galaxies, in universes uncounted and reborn.

Forever I remain, a stargazer.

Erec Stebbins, December 2025

About the Author



Erec Stebbins, 2022

Erec Stebbins is a biomedical researcher who writes thrillers and science fiction. He was born in the Midwest, his mother a clinical psychologist and his father a professor of Romance languages. His father's specialty is the source of the unusual spelling of his middle name, taken from knight in an Arthurian romance: *Érec et Énide*.

He has pursued diverse interests over the course of his life, including science, music, drama, and writing. His academic path focused on science, and he received a degree in physics from Oberlin College in 1992, and a PhD in biochemistry from Cornell University in 1999. He has worked for several decades studying the structure of biological macromolecules involved in disease.